



The Secret of Scotland Yard

A·ERIC BAYLY

蒙古文

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THE SECRET OF SCOTLAND YARD

By the same Author

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THE SECRET OF SCOTLAND YARD

A Mystery

BY

A. ERIC BAYLY

AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE OF STRANGE SECRETS," ETC.

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The Secret of Scotland Yard

CHAPTER I

THE SECRET OF THE TELEPHONE

"TAKE my advice," recommended my partner, Rodney, "and have nothing to do with anonymous letters."

"That's all very well," I replied, "but no one knows better than you that the business is on its last legs, and if this communication means money, well, plainly, we mustn't disregard it. It cannot do me much harm even if it turns out to be a hoax, while, on the other hand, you know as well as I do that people who consult and employ detectives frequently have good reasons for not divulging their names at the first go-off."

"As you please," answered Rodney, somewhat annoyed. He is one of those people who never will realise that their own arguments are not infallible. "Do just as you please. Make an April fool of yourself, if you wish to do so, only don't bother me about it if you get into hot water. Now I must be off. Four o'clock already, and I've been sitting here doing nothing since eleven. What a life!"

"Yes, indeed," I said, adding, "Oh, for a good murder, or a big burglary, or even a divorce!"

He sighed, half-amused, as he took down his hat from the dusty peg on the stand, and then lighted one of his foul-smelling twopenny cigars before starting for home.

"I shall stay here to see if anything turns up," I called after him. "I've got the Carnaway report to draw up, and if nothing happens—well, I couldn't have spent the time less extravagantly. Good night."

Perhaps at this juncture a few words of introduction are necessary. Therefore, to commence in orthodox fashion, my name is Stanley Frank Merton: address, 4 Vine Lane, Fenchurch Street, City (top floor back — but that's a detail): profession, unofficial investigator; age, 24; appearance—well, that's rather too personal, so we'll stop there.

Alfred Rodney and I had set up in partnership a few months before, with a brass plate on the open door downstairs, and with the intention of making our fortunes and incidentally—in our own minds—of founding an establishment to beat Scotland Yard at its own game. Rodney was my senior by several years, and, as a means of demonstrating his seniority, killed as few hours by sitting in the office as it was possible for him to do. He was accustomed to explain that he had private means, private modes of enjoying himself, and—but in this case explanation was hardly necessary—that he was not fond of work. How he occupied his spare time was something of a mystery to me.

The anonymous letter, by the mention of which I commenced what is likely to be a lengthy story, was addressed to me at the office by a person who—how I don't know—was aware of my whole name, and wrote it in the most villainous “fist” a postman was ever given the opportunity of anathematising. Rodney's suggestion that it was written by a blind man with a hot knitting-needle may convey a better idea of the nature of the handwriting than any phrase I can think of, so I need say no more about my correspondent's neglected calligraphy. The envelope was correctly stamped, and bore the post-mark “Paddington, 22nd April 18—, 10 P.M.”

The message contained therein was on a half-sheet of clean, hieratica note-paper, and inscribed in the same shaky, illegible handwriting (whether man's or woman's I did not know). It was without date, address, or signature, and ran as follows:—

“Learning on good authority that you are an individual to be trusted, I venture to approach you with a request that you will grant me an interview at your office this night at 10 o'clock, when it will be possible for you to accept a small commission from the writer, which is likely to prove remunerative. Anonymity until the interview is over is necessary, but you are requested not to regard this precaution as an insult. Reasons incapable of explanation at the moment necessitate caution, and the presence of a lamp in your front room at specified hour will be regarded as a sign that this earnest request is met in the spirit in which it is made.”

Hard-headedness has always been a strong point

with me. My friends sometimes call this quality unscrupulousness, but I prefer the other word. Yet, hard-headed or no, there was something fascinating to me in that anonymous letter, with its lengthy, cumbersome phrases that seemed all the queerer by reason of their incompatibility with the handwriting of my unknown correspondent. I may frankly confess that, interesting though I found the scraps of work that came my way, I was not sufficiently charmed with my novel profession to spend the evening in the dingy little office when I might have been at home by my cheery fireside, or on a late visit to the house in Maida Vale, in which resided the girl who was more than all the rest of the world to me. However, to be brief, I decided to forego such pleasures and await the hour of ten o'clock and the coming of my unknown correspondent.

I had arranged to sup informally with my fiancée and her mother that night, and it will demonstrate the extent of my interest in the letter to confess that I telegraphed "Detained by business; regret unable to look in to-night" on receipt of the epistle.

Deeply engrossed in my work, I was, to use a common expression, lost to the world from the moment of Rodney's departure until the sharp, decisive tingle of the telephone bell drew my attention from my writing, and caused me to wonder who it was that wished to consult me at that time of night. I rose and responded to the call, when, to my annoyance, the exchange girl informed me that she believed she had made a mistake, but would ascertain. She apologised and evidently withdrew.

I should have followed her example (in the latter case) had not my attention been arrested by a soft murmur that made itself audible in the silence of the night.

Overcome by my curiosity, I paused to listen. I knew perfectly well that anything I heard was not intended for my ears, for the girl at the exchange had distinctly informed me that only by error had she rung me up. No, I confess that curiosity, pure and simple, got the better of me, and I kept the earpiece pressed against the side of my head waiting to hear anything beyond the indistinct murmur that had first attracted my attention.

"It's risky," were the first words I detected, "but I had to use these means to communicate with you. I am alone in the house, and dare not leave. Are you still there? Well, I am convinced he contemplates action. I have sent 'S.' down to pump him. I always suspected him. If he has let out, then *may the Lord have mercy on his soul*, for 'S.' is armed to the teeth. Keep your eye on the Agony Column. Should he have given the game away, I will warn you. Of course, I don't fear for myself, and there is really no danger for any of us, but"—there was a pause, then the same voice continued—"she's safe as a house; but, heavens, her shrieks! Curse her, there she is again." And even as the words reached my ear I fancied that, coming whence I knew not, a faint, low, distant moan of terror or misery disturbed the night-silence that followed the evident secrets, the eccentricities of

the telephone had revealed to me. Then ensued a sharp click, and all was quiet. Was it fancy? Was it reality?—that eldritch scream. I cannot say. To this day I have never satisfied myself as to which was the case. My imagination does not often play me such tricks, but then, on the other hand, the telephone is a means of communication between two persons only. By a strange freak, though, I had been permitted to act the part of eavesdropper, and I almost trembled as I thought of the sinister words and disguised remarks that I had overheard. What did they all mean? What was the danger referred to? What was the errand of the mysterious "S."? Who was the nameless "he" so frequently alluded to? And who and where was the speaker, alone in a house, save for a woman who shrieked? In the few moments I had spent with my ear to the telephone, I had been plunged into the very heart of a mystery! That was quite plain.

Then, as I stood pondering over what I had heard, and mechanically tugging at my moustache, I was suddenly conscious of that uncanniest of sensations—that one is being overlooked.

Glancing up hurriedly, I perceived that the little pigeon-hole window of the inner door of the office had been gently raised, and that some one was attentively watching my movements.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT

I ROSE instantly, and walked towards the opening.

“Is any one there?” I asked, my heart beating in an absurd fashion, whether or no as a result of what I had heard I cannot say.

“Are you Mr Merton?” asked the person on the other side of the railed counter.

“At your service, sir.”

I opened the door, and a tall figure passed through. At a glance I saw that my late visitor was as remarkable as the letter I had received. As I say, he was extremely tall and thin. His face was pinched, haggard, and lined, though I felt sure he was a young man, in spite of the touch of grey in his long, lank hair. He was unshaven and dishevelled. Dressed in clothes of the commonest quality, he presented the appearance of a street-scavenger, yet before he spoke I knew by intuition that he was a gentleman. He carried his left arm as though it were injured, and seemed somewhat lame, judging from the way in which he stumbled across the room in response to my invitation to take a seat.

"I—er—am—not sure," I began, sorely puzzled in my mind by the stranger's manner and appearance.

"Mr Merton," he interrupted, in a voice that was musical and low, and strengthened my conviction that he was an educated man—"Mr Merton," he proceeded, after a pause that to me, perhaps, seemed longer than it really was, "it is with very natural diffidence that I approach you on a most delicate subject. I regret that for various reasons I am as yet unable to reveal my name. However, I think I may be able to put some work in your way, under which circumstances it is possible that you may feel inclined to accept my offer without the usual—and in this case wholly unnecessary—preliminary formalities?"

"May I ask," I observed, after momentary hesitation, "your reasons for refraining from confiding in me to any extent? You must know that many are the secrets that have been revealed within these four walls." I told the untruth with quite dramatic force of elocution, which, however, did not greatly impress my remarkable client.

"I cannot tell you—as yet," he stammered.

"Of course, you realise that such refusal is likely to raise one's suspicions?"

"No. Why?" broke in my companion quickly.

"Because such reticence is most unusual on the part of an investigator's client. However—"

"You will assist me? That is good. As to the question of your remuneration, I am afraid—"

"We will waive that subject for the present," I said grandly.

"That is also very good of you," he said.

"And now, what can I do for you?"

"Accompany me to a certain house, and be present at a most important interview."

"When?"

"To-night—now!"

"Really, this is most unusual."

"Very well," replied my visitor. "I will wish you good evening, and take my business elsewhere."

His ruse had the desired effect. Under the circumstances, already hinted at, I could not allow a possible client to depart merely because his mode of doing business was somewhat irregular. Therefore I said :

"I consent to the arrangement. Fortunately, I have not a great deal of business on hand."

"So I was led to understand."

"May I ask by whom?" I asked suddenly.

"Oh, that is immaterial," replied my visitor, a tinge of colour rising to his cheeks.

Certainly he was a remarkable person—this new client of mine.

"Time is precious," he pursued ; "let us be moving. The place of the appointment is some distance from here, and already it is quite ten o'clock."

So saying, he rose, and with, I confess, mingled feelings of suspicion and excitement, I followed his example.

Then, having locked up the office and left the key with the sleepy porter, we stepped out into the half-frozen drizzle of the night.

A cab was waiting outside, and at my companion's

invitation I entered the vehicle. The driver having been directed, we were soon rumbling through the deserted streets of the city, the direction being westwards.

In spite of the darkness inside the vehicle, I could not help noticing that my new client seemed strangely agitated. He shivered several times, but I doubted if it were the cold that affected him.

Who was he? I wondered to myself when I found him disinclined to talk. Why did he refrain from revealing his name? What was the cause of so polished and gentlemanly a person being clad in such unbecoming garb? Were his ill-fitting clothes a disguise? There was certainly a great deal of mystery about the case, and I anticipated some uncommon adventures, but, frankly speaking, none so strange as those I eventually met with. To be sure, I seemed to have been transplanted into a maze of mysteries.

My companion had taken care to direct the cabman without allowing me to overhear the name of our destination. However, I flatter myself that I know London as well as most men, and at first, at any rate, I had no difficulty in following the route taken by our conveyance.

After emerging into Fenchurch Street we drove down Lombard Street, and crossing the square commonly known as "The Bank," quickly left Cheapside behind us, and turned into Newgate Street. Once into the main road, we proceeded almost in a straight line along Holborn and Oxford Street. Passing the Marble Arch on our left,

we rumbled on down the Bayswater Road until Uxbridge Road Station was reached, when our course swerved off to the right. So far I had no difficulty in learning my exact whereabouts, but after passing through Acton and skirting Ealing Common, our driver turned sharply down a lane on the right-hand side, the name of which was not familiar to me. Several further turns confused me, and when, after passing through numberless streets of neat, typical "suburban residences," we ascended a hill, and drew up suddenly in front of a lonely-looking house, I had quite lost my bearings.

The house before which the cab had stopped stood some way from any other buildings in the long nameless street, and appeared considerably older than its neighbours. It looked dark and dismal in the extreme, and on seeing it for the first time I regretted that I had placed myself so entirely in my new client's hands.

If there was to be, as my companion had stated, an interview held at this dingy suburban house to-night, how was it that no lights were visible? Recollections of the many weird tales I had read flashed across my mind in the moment of alighting from the vehicle — tales of kidnapped people, of murders, of mystery, of beguiled detectives enticed into empty houses where they were silently dispatched at a single blow across the dark river into the unknown. And many such like.

The hand of my mysterious companion grasped my arm.

"We are at the end of our journey," he muttered

beneath his breath. And I noticed that, to use a vulgarism, he was "all of a tremble." Why did he dread the visit upon which I had accompanied him?

A gruff remark by our late driver drew my attention to that worthy.

"Say, guv'nor," he observed to my companion, but in such tones that I was able to overhear him, "the 'oss is about dead. I weally can't wait any longer. The 'oss ain't me own, or we might arrange summat. Troublin' you for the fare is what I'll be doing if you don't object," he added, quite civilly.

Thus addressed, my companion commenced to converse with him in low tones. Then I perceived that the former was offering the cabman something he had drawn from one of the pockets of his overcoat. The "Jehu" seemed surprised. I distinctly heard him remark, "Lor, what's this?" Then apparently satisfied, he promised to await the return of his fares, and, turning from him, my queer client again caught hold of my arm, and drew me into the porch of the dark house.

"Hush-h-h," he murmured.

I had expected him to knock, but he did not. Instead he requested me to wait in the porch alone. Whereupon he left me, and disappeared into the shadows cast by the house on the plot of garden that surrounded it. Outside the gate the cabman's yawns as he rubbed down his steaming horse alone disturbed the grim silence.

Again did those annoying recollections already

referred to arise in my mind, and tempt me to flee away from possible danger before the stranger's return.

Bah! Why was I so nervous? What, I wondered, would Rodney say if he could see me trembling like a child in a dentist's waiting-room? The words I had heard through the telephone had unnerved me.

My attention was arrested by sounds from within. Some one was fumbling with the bolts of the door. These were at length released, and the door was cautiously thrown open. I peered in to see who the porter was. He was none other than my companion of a few minutes before.

"Hush-h-h," he muttered again, and added, "Come in."

Then I stepped across the threshold, and the door closed gently upon me.

"Have you a match?" were the first words that cleft the darkness.

I handed him my vesta-case, inwardly wondering why he was not himself supplied with matches.

He struck a light, and I was able to take a hurried glance at our surroundings.

We were, as I knew, in the hall—but it was unfurnished, apparently the house was uninhabited!

By the merest chance I was carrying in my pocket one of those cheap little pocket candles that a detective so frequently finds of use. This I insisted on lighting, though I could not prevent my companion from taking it, when alight, from me.

"Front room, first floor," he muttered, as he made his way to the foot of the uncarpeted staircase. The

natural deduction I made from this remark was that the stranger was not himself familiar with the house in which we stood. How he entered it in order to open the door for me was, therefore, a puzzle. Presumably, he had made what would be considered a burglarious entry. I have frequently found (I mention the fact in passing) that the windows of empty houses are not invariably fastened as securely as they might be.

Closely following my guide, I ascended the stairs on tip-toe. Though my heart was beating fast and furiously, I felt less uneasy than before. If my companion intended attacking me, as I had imagined he would (though I knew of no one who might be called an enemy of mine), surely he would have done so on entering the house. If he intended mischief he would not allow me to follow him upstairs, but rather would send me ahead. No, I became convinced that he had an appointment that night, but that the appointment was with some one who was evidently in hiding. Hence the remarkable precautions of my guide, and the unusual hour arranged for the interview, at which, for some unknown reason, I was to be present.

At the head of the staircase my leader paused. His agitation was still very noticeable. He dreaded the interview, that was quite plain ; why, then, did he keep his appointment ?

Plucking up courage he went forward. There were two doors visible on the first floor. One was that of a room undoubtedly at the back of the house, and of this he took no notice.

Outside the other door there was yet another pause; then, raising the candle above his head, my companion turned the handle, and with bold step entered the room, which was quite dark and barely furnished.

But of the fact that the room was in any way furnished, I only became aware later. When first the door was thrown open, and I followed my companion inside, there was something else that arrested my attention, something the sight of which drew forth a strange, terrible cry from my guide's throat; something which seemed to petrify my blood; which caused me to recoil in horror with an echo of the stranger's cry on my lips.

For on the bare floor in the centre of the room lay what at first looked like a great bundle of clothes, tumbled about in the most remarkable manner. But when the light of the little candle fell upon it, I saw that the dark mass consisted of two forms —*the forms of men*. One of the two was a corpse—even my unpracticed eye could tell that. But even as I looked I fancied I detected a movement of the other, and simultaneously I perceived that the two forms were fastened together at the wrists—the forms of the dead, and, as I firmly believed, the living, fastened together by chains that shot back the pale rays of the candle light when they fell upon them.

CHAPTER III

THE SILENT HOUSE ON THE HILL

FASCINATED, horrified, surprised, I stood for no inconsiderable period, motionless, by the side of my unknown companion. That it should have fallen to my lot to make the grim discovery in the silent house was alone remarkable, for I have always been considered a most commonplace sort of individual, to whom adventure of any startling nature is unknown. But that I should end the day in this remarkable fashion, after discovering myself to be in the midst of so much mystery connected with the telephone and my unknown client, was strange beyond measure.

Only a few hours before I had been lamenting the lack of anything startling ; now I was provided with enough romance, tragedy, and mystery to form the plot of a detective story. Such is life. It never rains, but it pours. The rich man is continually benefiting under the wills of deceased acquaintances. The poor one struggles on without any such assistance. An amateur investigator, desiring something to occupy his time, suddenly finds that he is struggling in a very sea of mystery,

and regrets that he is not allowed time to attempt the solution of one problem before another, and a stranger, is set before him to grapple with.

Such was my position. I had barely decided in my own mind whether my mysterious correspondent was a man or woman before, by one of those coincidences that make life what it is, the telephone revealed to me secrets that were intended for the ear of no living creature but the man (or woman?) who was requested to keep an eye on the Agony Column of some newspaper unmentioned. My head reeling with the bizarre suggestions of that one-sided conversation, I had turned to find myself under observation. My client—mystery personified—carried me off to the house in which I now stood, and there the marvellous discovery of the two grim forms caused me to rub my eyes in wonder that I, plain Stanley Frank Merton, should be thus privileged (?) and have my lightly-spoken wishes gratified a hundredfold more thoroughly than in my wildest hopes I could have anticipated.

With difficulty could I summon up courage to remain in that room. My companion, moaning from pure terror, clung to my arm, and I seized the candle from his shaking hand only in time to save it from falling.

“Good Lord, I am too late!”

Those were his words—words that to me seemed as remarkable as his behaviour had been throughout. What did he mean? Had he expected to make this discovery, or prevent the evident murder? Plainly not, for he had recoiled, impelled

by the same sensations of horror that had affected me. Yet he had either expected to find something similar to that which he had found, or, judging by his remark, he had—I shuddered at the idea—come to commit the terrible outrage, in the performing of which he had been preceded!

But now the instincts of human nature asserted themselves in me. “Here,” I said to myself, “is some poor creature alive, but apparently in a very sorry plight. It is my duty to assist him.” Accordingly, finding that my newly-made client was recovering from the shock of the discovery, I stepped forward, and, by the light of the candle I now held in my hand, scrutinised the motionless forms on the floor.

It sickens me even now to think of the one—the poor corpse battered beyond recognition, and I will not inflict upon the reader any description of the scene. I will merely mention that the man must have been tall and thin, that he was decently dressed, and was, without doubt, the victim of foul play.

What I could not help noticing was his shrunken appearance, and the fact that his features had been battered beyond resemblance by some heavy flat instrument.

Overcoming the nauseating sensations produced by the preliminary examination, I turned my attention to the other form. It was that of a youngish man of athletic frame and pale complexion. He appeared to be entirely uninjured, but judging by the prevailing odour in the room, and

the fact that he was evidently unconscious, I presumed he was under the influence of some powerful narcotic. Decently-dressed — if anything, a trifle overdressed — the incongruity of his surroundings and unenviable position struck me as most remarkable.

The unfortunate fellow was fastened to the awful thing that lay at his side, by nothing less than a pair of police handcuffs!

With trembling hand, I vainly endeavoured to release him, and then remembered the presence of my unknown companion. Turning in a fever of heat and dismay lest he should have quietly left me while my back was turned, I saw that he was leaning against the wall, limp as a rag, wiping the beads of perspiration from his shining brow.

"Great Heaven! that it should have come to this," he muttered to himself, regardless of my presence. Then, seeing that I was watching him, he pulled himself together.

"Come," he whispered, "we must get out of this. Oh, it is dreadful. Too late! Too late!" And he seized my shoulder, dragging me to my feet.

"But this poor wretch—" I began, when he cut me short.

"I know nothing about him," he said hurriedly, from which I gathered that his emotion was caused by the discovery of the corpse.

"But we cannot leave him," I said; "we—"

"We must," he almost shouted. "I cannot remain here any longer. I am half stifled. You can

stay then," he added, perceiving that I was loath to leave the poor unconscious creature fastened down in so horrible a manner, "you can stay. I will go—and leave you."

But before the words were out of his mouth, I am ashamed to say, I was at his side.

"I will come," I murmured ungraciously, and I picked up the candle and what appeared to be my handkerchief that lay by its side.

Trembling at every step, he crept down the creaking staircase with me, the candle throwing weird, elongated shadows on the unpapered wall as we went.

Gently closing the front door after extinguishing the light, we jumped into the cab, my companion again giving instructions to the driver.

I was overcome by heat, though the night was bitter, and drew the handkerchief I had picked up, from my pocket to wipe my brow. As I did so, some mark on it arrested my attention. The handkerchief was not mine.

On it was inscribed, in a large heavy hand, a single letter. But the sight of that letter thrilled me with astonishment.

Was it mere coincidence, or were the mystery of the telephone and that of the silent house connected? For the letter on the handkerchief was a capital "S," and "S" was the person who had been referred to by the unknown speaker whose words I had overheard!

And I recollect that expression that had been used, so pregnant with a horrible meaning:—

"If he has let out, may the Lord have mercy on his soul!"

And I thought of the tragedy in that half empty room, and of the poor outraged corpse; while my companion shuddered to himself in the corner, and the cab rumbled onward towards London.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

DEEP in thought, my companion's sudden touch on my arm startled me.

"Mr Merton," he said, and his voice, though inclined to quaver, was cold and deliberate, "before you leave me, before you leave this cab, you must promise me, vow, on your honour, that once you reach London again, that which you have seen shall be forgotten as a dream; that no effort shall be made to discover the whereabouts of the house we visited to-night; that none shall be told of my visit, and that," and as he spoke these words his voice dropped until the emphatic demand was barely audible above the clatter of the cab windows in their fittings, "that you will not inform the police of what you know."

In the semi-silence that followed his strange remarks I was aware that he was eagerly watching my face, his head bent forward to catch the reply that did not come.

"Well?" he asked hoarsely, "what is your answer?"

But still I could not make response.

"If," he hinted, "if you do not comply—"

"I do not," I said quietly but firmly.

"Then, *may the Lord have mercy on your soul.*"

And, as he spoke thus, I fell back against the dusty cushions of the cab, trembling in every limb. The words were the identical ones that had been whispered by an unknown speaker into the telephone a few hours ago. And I knew—or presumed I knew—that the grim wish would be that of every living creature for the poor wretched being whose corpse lay chained to the body of a senseless companion in the silent house on the hill. The threatened result of some action on the part of the mysterious "he" mentioned in that memorable speech made through the telephone had been, alas, swift to follow, and terrible. And the threat was now repeated by my strange companion to me.

Now I realised that I had not been over-nervous, that my position was, indeed, one of danger, that unless I did as the stranger bade me, in spite of the fact that by so doing I should be acting criminally, the fate of the unhappy creature who now lay a battered corpse in the lonely room we had visited would, in all probability, be mine!

Hardly waiting to see the effect of his words, my client proceeded.

"Swear as I bid you," he muttered, threateningly.

"No," I said, determined that at least I would hold out as long as possible. "No, I cannot. I am a detective, the last person to endeavour to

conceal so brutal a crime. My first duty will be to inform the police of what they will find in the first-floor room of the house on the hill!"

"Then I am sorry for you," he observed, but not unkindly. "To a young man life is very precious. I am young, and I have known what it is to be in danger of one's life. Therefore you will agree that I do not speak idly. Mr Merton, believe me, you know too much to please some people."

He little thought, was my mental observation, that I knew a good deal more than he was aware I did, that the secrets revealed to me owing to the eccentricities of the telephone were puzzling me as much as those of the Ealing house.

"I am sorry for you," he repeated, "particularly because it was I who brought you down here, having heard of your capabilities, and believing that the companionship of a shrewd man would be valuable to me. Of your shrewdness I am now doubtful. There are times when a man would do well to keep his eyes and his mouth judiciously closed, and to stifle his human instincts. The present, for you, is such a time. Take care while there is yet a chance. Ignorance is easily feigned, but a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. For the sake of another, if not for your own, I hope you will reconsider your decision before it is too late."

The more I saw of him the greater enigma did this now calm stranger become. To whom did he refer when he spoke of "another" for whose sake I should beware? What did he know of me? Why had I been chosen to accompany him on this mys-

terious errand which had ended so abruptly? Did he know my loved one, Carline?

"I do not understand to whom you refer," I said, after a long pause.

"That means you will not take the advice of one who would risk anything rather than endanger your life?" he remarked interrogatively.

Here was more mystery. In what way did it affect him if I disregarded his advice? The threats had come from him. At least they seemed like threats, though possibly he merely knew what the results of disobedience on my part would be, and warned me. Yet such knowledge undoubtedly suggested his own connection with those who wished the tragedy of the silent house to remain unknown to the world. I was as much—if not more—in the dark than ever.

"What does it matter to you whether any harm comes to me?" I asked at length.

"It matters much to me—and others," he added enigmatically.

What irony it seemed. My offence was that I knew too much. And yet I knew nothing, or, rather, what I knew was quite inexplicable to me.

"Then," he said quietly, "it is 'No'? Very good. I cannot reward you now for your services. Your remuneration will be forwarded in a day or two, and—and—"

"And what?"

"And I hope it will not come too late. Good-night. I will stop the cab here, as it is as near as we go to your house. Good-night, and—good-bye."

So saying, he gently thrust me out of the vehicle which had come to a stop. I was surprised to find we had reached Oxford Circus.

Without a word, without heeding his outstretched hand, I stepped on to the pavement.

The cabman whipped up his horse, and the conveyance passed on quickly, but not before I had caught a last glimpse of the unknown occupant of the cab.

To my utter astonishment, I perceived that he had burst into tears !

CHAPTER V

SHADOWS ON A WINDOW BLIND

MANY minutes must have passed before I realised that I was standing, insensible to the chilly blast of winter, on the pavement of deserted Oxford Street.

So much that was insolvable to me had, for the moment, deadened my wits.

I had already realised that my late companion knew a deal more of me than I did of him. It was a puzzle to me how he was even aware of my identity, but his knowledge of me was apparently not confined to my City existence. He had referred to a person for whose sake I ought to blind my eyes to what I had seen. To whom could he possibly refer but my loved one, Carline Spenser, since I had no relatives in London, and few elsewhere, for whom I cared anything? Then, last of all, he had shown me that he knew my private address, for he had, indeed, set me down at the spot nearest my lodgings in Portland Street, when he had himself continued his journey in the direction of the City. When, too late, I wondered why I had not (and wished I had) thought of following the cab either in

another—there were plenty about—or on foot, being quite fresh, while the cab horse was tired out. Then, too, I began to wonder whether I had done wisely in refusing to make the promise that had been demanded of me.

"For another's sake." The words occurred to me again and again. Then I recalled those others that I had heard twice repeated within so short a time. "The Lord have mercy on your soul." Again I trembled as the recollections of all I had gone through since receipt of the anonymous letter passed before me in rapid succession. Oh, why had I not taken Rodney's advice? "Have nothing to do with anonymous communications," he had recommended. And like the fool I cursed myself for being, I had not heeded the advice of my partner, and now I was threatened with a terrible death!

As I roamed thoughtlessly about the streets, every footfall on the frozen pavement drew me up sharp to listen. Something that moved seemed to lurk in every dark corner that I passed. Ever and anon those sinister words were on my lips.

I might have been a doomed criminal, and the grim words those of a black-capped judge.

Though I was so unnerved, I felt indisposed to return home to bed. A fit of restlessness drove me on and on. Proceeding unconsciously, I at length found myself in the neighbourhood of Aubrey Square, Maida Vale, in which prosaic but eminently respectable district my dear one resided with her widowed mother.

Their house (No. 4) stood back from the road,

but from the pavement farthest from it I was able to look up at the windows, though I knew that there could be nothing to see at such an hour of the morning. (I had observed that a neighbouring clock had just proclaimed the hour of 2 A.M.)

To my surprise, I perceived that one of the windows in the front of the house was lighted up, though the dark blinds were drawn.

Who could be up, requiring a light at such an hour, in the well-regulated establishment of Mrs Spenser? My first fear was of burglars. The Spensers were not rich, but there was plenty of valuable plate in the house which would make the "crib" worth "cracking." My suspicions were strengthened by the sight that presently rewarded my five minutes of waiting.

A shadow crept across the dull blind, the shadow of some one crossing the room and passing between the light and the window. My feelings of astonishment gave place to ones of horror when I discovered that the shadow was that of a man.

What man but a housebreaker was it that moved about in the Spensers' house at so early an hour of the morning?

I was on the point of crossing the road and ringing the bell to attract the attention of the no-doubt sleeping inhabitants, when another shadowy figure crossed the blind of the lighted room.

Instantly discovering the identity of this second occupant of the room, I became easier in my mind, knowing that at least it was not a case of burglary, but I felt that I had chanced upon yet another

mystery. For the second figure (easily recognised by the head-dress) was that of Mrs Spenser herself.

As I looked the light was suddenly extinguished, and I strolled away, suspiciously regarded by a passing policeman, with the feeling that there was something very strange about what I had seen.

Still disinclined for bed, and recollecting that I had been careless enough to leave the papers on which I was engaged at the office littered about my writing-table, inviting an inspection from the woman who cleaned out the rooms we rented, I made my way towards the City, still deeply engrossed by my unpleasant thoughts. I was not sorry that I had seen what I had on the blind of the Aubrey Square house. My meditations on this mysterious circumstance distracted my thoughts from the subjects that had preyed upon me since I left the stranger on alighting from the cab.

The walk to Fenchurch Street through silent streets occupied considerably over an hour, but I found the building in which our offices were situated open, and the night porter sleeping peacefully in his box downstairs. It was customary for the door to remain unlocked, and the porter in charge throughout the night.

I lighted the gas in the office, and, collecting my papers, carefully stowed them away in the little safe.

Turning to depart, a piece of paper folded triangularly, and lying almost under the outer door, caught my eye.

I picked it up, not without a feeling of curiosity

as to what it might be, but I little expected to read such words as I found inscribed upon the paper by the same hand that had written the anonymous letter I had received earlier.

This was the message contained in the communication, which had evidently been thrust under the door :—

“Sir,—I am sorry you did not wait to learn what my business was, or is it possible that you never received my letter? In any case, it is your loss, as I have decided to take my business elsewhere.—Yours, Your Anonymous Correspondent.”

Instantly I recollect ed in dismay that the stranger who had visited me a little before ten on the previous night had not mentioned that he was the writer of the anonymous letter requesting an appointment. I had presumed he was that person solely because I had not met him before, and because he came at the unusual hour arranged for the appointment by the writer of the nameless letter. Now I perceived that I had made a mistake.

I did not consider at the time how it was that the stranger, without arranging for me to await his coming, should expect to find me at the office at so late an hour. I could merely marvel at the manner in which mysteries seemed to flow in upon me, one after another.

Here was another mysterious person in the drama in which I was playing so prominent a part. Was this person, who, like my client of a few hours before, refused to reveal either his name or the

nature of his business, in any way connected with those mysteries which I was already struggling to penetrate?

Hastening downstairs, I awoke the drowsy porter and interrogated him as to who had entered the building since I had left at ten o'clock.

"No one, sir," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"Think again," I said, ostentatiously drawing a silver coin from my pocket.

"Ah, I remember now," the man said, his face brightening. "Only two persons have been in, that I will swear. They were together—two ladies, who went right upstairs, perhaps to your rooms, sir, at any rate, above the second floor. One, a lady heavily veiled and dressed in black. An elderly looking person, sir, whom I had never seen before. The other young and, maybe, good-looking. But she, too, was hidden under a heavy black veil."

CHAPTER VI

NOTES FROM A CASE-BOOK

By this time I had become so accustomed to mysterious circumstances which would a day or so before have excited my interest enormously that I regarded this last discovery in the light of a mere incident. However, the porter's remarks concerning my visitors caused me to ponder, and, pondering, I realised that, since sleep was out of the question, the best thing I could do would be to sit down and have a good think. Goodness only knows, I had enough to think about!

Accordingly I retraced my steps upstairs, lighted the gas again, locked the outer door of the office, and, warming the room by putting a match to the small stove, sat down in the arm-chair with a pencil and writing-block before me, to think the matter out.

First, I decided to briefly sketch, for future reference, my adventures since receipt of the anonymous letter. This was soon done. Then I commenced setting down what I considered to be my own position. I have these notes before me as I write, and the following is an exact copy of them:—

" My position is undoubtedly one of danger, judging by the following significant facts :—

" 1. The nameless 'he' referred to in the telephone conversation is visited by the mysterious personage 'S.' If 'he' has revealed certain matters that concerned the speakers through the telephone, 'S.' is evidently to take desperate steps, since the devout wish of the speaker (also unknown) is the sinister '*May the Lord have mercy on his soul.*'

" Presumption : That 'he' has revealed the secrets.

" 2. 'S.' visits a certain house (that on the hill-top at Ealing), where he evidently encounters 'he' (I use the nominative of the pronoun because this name is the only one by which I can easily refer to the individual).

" 3. 'He' is found dead the same night, and a handkerchief marked 'S.' is afterwards discovered by the side of the corpse.

" 4. I penetrate secrets that were not intended for me, and am warned to forget all about what I discover in the lonely house. I refuse, and the same dread wish, '*May the Lord have mercy on your soul,*' is expressed, but by a totally different person from the one who whispered it through the telephone, ergo :—

" 5. ! ! —"

I dared not fill in that last chapter in the series of facts bearing upon the case. My meaning, though, will be plain to every reader. It was, oh, so plain to me, and, in fact, compelled me to rise and make sure that the outer door was securely locked before proceeding.

My next step was to set down in order what moves I should make towards solving the mystery, and in duty bound. Provided, of course, that my existence did not reach the abrupt ending that had attended the indiscretion of ‘he’! My notes on this subject were these :—

1. To inform Scotland Yard of what I saw in the house on the hill (this to be done first of all).
2. To ascertain the exact position of the house at Ealing.
3. To discover the cabman who drove the stranger and me to Ealing. By this means to learn exactly where the former went after setting me down at Oxford Circus.
4. To learn how long the house on the hill has remained empty, and how it comes to be furnished at all.
5. To have expert opinion on the two anonymous letters received by me.
6. To discover which “numbers” were engaged at the moment when I overheard those secrets through the telephone. (N.B.—This is, I feel sure, an absolute impossibility.)
7. To learn the identity of the unconscious man chained to the corpse.
8. To discover whether the business of the two veiled ladies has any connection with the mystery of the lonely house.
9. To ascertain whether any woman has lately been reported as missing. (This to account for the presence of the woman whose shrieks I had, or had fancied I had, heard in the house in which the

telephone speaker was compelled to remain for some unknown reason, and where the said woman is evidently imprisoned.)

Truly, a big task and one likely to occupy a considerable time! I marked numbers 2, 3, and 4, as those matters that required earliest notice, always excepting No. 1, which would need attending to at daybreak.

On another sheet of paper I commenced to scribble down some "suggestions," more or less as follows:—

1. Are the telephone parties, "he," "S.," and the stranger whom I accompanied to Ealing, members of some secret society, since death is the punishment attending the revelation by one of them of secrets that concern the others? Probability, yes.
2. Is the Ealing house used by this society for any particular purpose? Probability, yes.

But I could get no further.

At about this stage in my reasoning a thought flashed across my brain that, strive as I might, I could not dismiss with the contempt the suggestion seemed to deserve.

Was the little mystery of the shadows on the blind of No. 4 Aubrey Square, in any way connected with the great mystery that was puzzling me?

The idea was suggested by the sudden recollection that my stranger client had spoken so distinctly of one for whose sake alone I ought to hesitate before endangering my life by refusing to make the promise demanded of me. If he knew about

Carline, was it possible that she knew anything of him? "Note (made on another sheet of paper).—Ask 'C.' about the nocturnal visitor whose shadow I saw on the window-blind."

And then I went on to recall the last incident of yesterday—the visit of the two veiled ladies.

"Now," I asked myself, "why had they taken the trouble to veil themselves? Was it because they did not wish me to recognise them?"

If so, presumably they were people with whom I was acquainted.

What two ladies—one old, the other young—was I acquainted with?

None to my knowledge, except—

I felt my heart give a great jump as I ended the sentence.

— except Carline and her mother.

Were they—could it be that they were—the mysterious veiled women?

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING CARLINE—AND OTHERS

IT will be seen that I am relating this story on the principle of “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Otherwise the last few words of the previous chapter would never have been set down. As I made a pencilled note of the matter, I confess that I felt a brute. That I should suspect her of all people—suspect my Carline of complicity in so dark a deed as that of the lonely house on the hill—it was too brutal and shameful of me!

To be sure, an atmosphere of not unpleasant secrecy surrounded my loved one and her mother, as regards the past life of both; but was the fact that such happened to be the case sufficient ground for me to entertain so monstrous an idea as that they were concerned in the puzzling enigma I had started to grapple with? Of course not. Besides, calm reasoning convinced me that neither Mrs Spenser nor Carline would be so foolish as to imagine that they could conceal their identity from me by means of a thick veil. How could they hope

to go unrecognised by one who, in the case of the older lady, was a prospective son-in-law; in the other case, a lover. Love may be blind to some things—there are none so blind, we all know, as those who will not see—but blindness, unintentional blindness, was quite impossible in such a case as the one in question.

No, plainly, I had not yet discovered who were the ladies that had visited me on the previous night. To do so was yet another self-imposed task—a task that seemed almost as impossible as that of penetrating the identity of the man whose voice I had heard at the telephone.

Now before I proceed any further, I think a few words about the inhabitants of 4 Aubrey Square are necessary.

From what I had heard at odd times, and taken care to remember, Mrs Theodore Spenser was of high birth. I shrewdly suspected that her marriage had been a misalliance, since the only subject on which the old lady was reserved and secretive was that of her husband. When the latter had been gathered to his fathers I did not know. Some of our mutual acquaintances once hinted that the sad event had not yet occurred, and whispered of divorce, but this suggestion I refused to accept.

One thing I did know of Mr Theodore Spenser. I had chanced one day to ask my dear one how she obtained the charming name by which her intimate friends knew her. I presumed it was some contraction of the stiff "Caroline," so suggestive of middle-age, owing to the fact that the name was a

deal more popular with our great-grandmothers than with the present generation.

"Oh, dear, no," replied Carline (the name is pronounced as though it were foreign, to rhyme with such words as Pauline), "my name has quite a history of its own. You know (or perhaps you don't know) that my father made a small fortune at Monte Carlo when on his honeymoon.

"A year or two later, when I was born, the inevitable subject of selecting a name cropped up.

"'Call her Monte Carlo,' my father suggested, 'because I was never so successful as at that place.'

"My mother almost fainted at the idea. 'Who ever heard of such a name?' she asked.

"'Well,' was the reply, 'have you never known of girls named after the town of Florence?' and he was quite adamant on the subject.

"On my mother persisting, with tears in her eyes, that such a name was impossible, my father made matters worse by proposing that only the latter part of the name should be bestowed upon me. This, however, was rejected by both as too suggestive of canine nomenclature, and then papa hit upon 'Carline,' pronouncing it as though it were Caroline with the 'o' dropped out. My mother, being a great admirer of the Italian language, softened the word down to its more euphonious form, and thus I came to be christened by my present name."

Now I think that anecdote is such as to give one a good idea of the lamented Mr Theodore Spenser's personality. Plainly he was either eccentric or of

lower tastes, and, probably, lower birth than his wife—a quiet little woman, who affected a head-dress and black satin dress indoors, and always assumed widow's weeds before leaving home.

As to Carline herself, can I describe her? I fear not; at least, not to do her justice. Certainly I could not exaggerate her charms. But then I suppose my opinion will be considered valueless. It will be said that I am prejudiced, that a lover's eye detects no faults. As a matter of fact, a lover is often critical in the extreme. He does not lose his powers of observation with the invariable larger or smaller proportion of his common sense, as the case may be. The fallacy is easily explained. The points in a woman, in judging which a man is most critical, are her manners and her dress, and in both these respects it is only natural that a girl in her fiancé's presence should be, or endeavour to be, irreproachable.

But I am prosing and making observations that neither concern my tale nor will interest its readers. To return to Carline.

She was short and small, like her mother, and had a wonderful figure. The observant individual will deduct rightly from this that I myself am tall. It is one of Cupid's eccentricities to pierce with a single arrow the hearts of two victims totally incongruous as regards size.

In accordance with another of the Love God's tricks, she was fair (whereas I am dark), and had the most fascinating eyes that I have ever seen. They were of the violety-blue shade, and protected

by long golden eyelashes. Her face, though not in every respect perfect from an artist's point of view, was sweet, and one not to be forgotten. But so much for description.

Of one thing I was quite convinced. She loved me as much as I loved her, and who the man was that I had seen in shadowy outline on the blind I did not care.

Mrs Spenser, I think, liked me, and Carline's love was true. And, too, they were in no way concerned, I felt sure, in the series of mysteries of last night. It was merely a coincidence that the presence of the light in the upstairs room which cast a strange shadow on the blind should have been detected after the other alarming discoveries. But no doubt explanation would be very simple and readily given when next I saw Carline.

Meanwhile I would hasten off to Scotland Yard for already the day had broken.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CRY OF THE CAPTIVE

As I cabbed it towards Whitehall, I could not help wondering why I had not proceeded there earlier, and, moreover, why I had told no one of my adventures since ten o'clock on the previous night.

Much might have happened in the hours that had passed. Supposing my idea about the various unknown persons concerned in the matter to be right, was it not possible that those hours might have been used to clear the house on the hill of its strange contents, and thus make me out to be a liar or one suffering from intensified imagination? Certainly if I were one of those responsible for the tragedy at the Ealing house, and learned that the police were to be informed of what they would find there, I would at once do all that was possible to conceal the traces of the crime in the few hours that must elapse before an official visit.

Consequently I was in a state of feverish excitement when I reached the "Yard," and managed to obtain an interview with one in authority, who listened to my story (from which I, of course,

omitted mention of the shadows on the window blind) calmly, but, I could see, with interest.

"The local force," said the official, at the conclusion of my narrative, "is the body with whom you should at once have communicated; but as the matter looks serious, I will send one of our men down with you, and, of course, have the Ealing people communicated with. Your card? Thank you. Do you think you will have any difficulty in finding the house? No? That is good. It will save time."

He had a minute before whispered into a speaking-tube and given some instructions. Now, evidently in answer to these, came a knock on the door, and a young man in a dark suit, wearing smoked glasses, entered. To him the gentleman with whom I had been conversing gave particulars of my discovery at the lonely house, and instructions to repair thither with me in a cab.

Ten minutes later a fast horse was drawing us at a good pace in the direction of Ealing.

My companion was a quiet, cold, individual, and expressed little interest in the story I had again to sketch for his benefit. On any other subject, however, but the work we were engaged upon he was not indisposed to converse. He gave me his views on certain political questions, and a "tip" for some race that I knew nothing about. He discussed the probability of the football team he backed winning a cup-tie match, and expressed his opinion—an unjust one, I thought—on the suburban police, comparing them unfavourably with the city force.

My summing-up of him was almost as unfavourable as his of the suburban police. To me he appeared a bumptious individual, fully conscious of his own importance. I was afterwards to learn that first impressions are sometimes unreliable.

Ealing was reached at length, and I directed the cabman to turn off to the right, as I recollect that our cab had done on the previous evening. Once at the end of this lane, though, and at a place where several roads met, I was in a quandary. Which direction had we taken?

To my surprise, the man from Scotland Yard did not hesitate for a moment.

"Hard to the left," he shouted through the trap, and the cabman followed his instructions.

"How do you know the way?" I asked somewhat indignantly.

"Common sense," he replied pleasantly, twirling a moustache that existed only in his imagination.

"You say," he added in explanation, "that the house was on the top of a hill. Well, both these other roads lead downwards. Therefore is it not at any rate probable that this road is the right one, since it leads up to the higher ground where, too, there are numerous cottages and houses, while there appear to be none in the other roads?"

Mortified that he should have been sharper than I was, I felt compelled to confess that he was right; and, perceiving my annoyance, he twirled his upper lip the more vigorously.

A district looks very different by day from what it does after dark, and it was not until we had driven

down numerous "cul-de-sacs" and otherwise drawn the anathemas of the cabman upon us that I became convinced we were at last near our destination.

Excited though I was at the probable nearness of yet another adventure, I did my best to conceal all traces of my feelings under the cold gaze of my companion.

Now we found ourselves at the foot of a steep incline, but the small houses all round us prevented me from ascertaining whether or no we were ascending the hill, at the top of which stood the lonely house I had visited less than a dozen hours before.

At last we were above all the suburban habitations, and half-fearfully I gazed up.

Yes, there, on the very summit, was a single desolate building standing in its own grounds—an uninhabited private dwelling. *The house!*

Cool as the traditional cucumber, the Scotland Yard man alighted from the hansom as, at my bidding, the vehicle drew up at the gate of the silent house. I followed with all speed.

"Wait for us," was my companion's instructions to the driver.

"How are we to get in?" I asked as we passed the rusty iron gate.

"How your friend did last night," replied the young man promptly, and we made our way together round to the back, where a small landing window stood open —no doubt it had been the mode of the stranger's entrance. At any rate, it was ours!

Inside, the house seemed very dark, in spite of the sun, which was shining brightly outside. This was

accounted for by the fact that almost every window in the house was shuttered. I produced my pocket candle and lighted it. Then we made our way upstairs.

As we went there came a sound from above that drew forth an exclamation from my companion, and made me give vent to my feelings by a half-suppressed shudder. *I* knew what that sound meant. My friend from the "Yard" probably imagined that some one was at work upstairs, hiding the traces of the mysterious crime.

We did not have to open the door of the first floor room. It was already thrown wide, and something—something black and crouching—filled the doorway.

The sounds we had heard—of a heavy body being dragged about, of the clinking of metal, and of low moans—ceased as the noise of our footsteps became audible to the one live creature that had occupied the house since I had left it with the stranger. Then, dinnig out all other sounds, there rose a horrible shrieking cry that disturbed my sleep and haunted my memory for days and nights. "Have mercy, oh, save me! *Save me before I go raving mad!*"

CHAPTER IX

THE DEAD MAN'S PRISONER

"GREAT SCOTT!" muttered the man from the "Yard," apparently unmoved by the pathetic cry of the captive, "What have we here?"

I raised the candle above my head.

Looking up into our faces, staring strangely and blinking in the sudden light, was the form of the man whom I had seen in an unconscious state the night before. Every movement he made was accompanied by the sounds that we first heard on entering the house. For he was still a captive, chained arm to arm, in the ancient fashion, to a guardian from whom, without help, it was impossible to escape, and who was uncorruptible by the richest bribes that a man could offer. Every movement on the part of the crawling man seemed to be imitated, mocked, by the silent corpse of the nameless "he."

I marvel to this day that the man could have lived through such an ordeal. No wonder his cry was "Save me before I go raving mad!"

"Is gas laid on here?" asked my companion, with all his senses about him.

I made search, and finding a gas bracket in the passage, soon had the place brightly illumined. Then we both bent over that strange mass.

"Hum, police 'bracelets,'" remarked the official detective; "wonder where they came from."

Without difficulty he wrenched them apart, whether or no with a key I cannot recall.

Then, seizing the living form by the shoulder, he helped me to raise the man to his feet, where he stood for a moment half-dazed and moaning aloud. Then he bent down and peered into the face of the corpse. When he had scrutinised the features for several moments, he rose and leaned against the wall breathing hard. It may have been fancy, but to me it appeared that the result of this remarkable examination was surprising to the rescued man.

"Who are you?" asked my fellow investigator, at length, "who are you, and what are you doing here?" He spoke coldly. One might have imagined that the wretched man was the perpetrator, instead of one of the victims, of a mysterious crime.

"I don't know," stammered the half-dazed creature.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I forget. It's all a mystery to me. I can't remember what has happened. How long have I been here? Where am I? What is the meaning of that?" and he pointed nervously in the direction of the corpse on the floor.

"That's what we want to know ourselves."

"I wish I could tell you," the other replied,

shaking his head, "but I can't. My memory seems to have gone completely. Perhaps it will return in time. Have you a flask, either of you?"

I fortunately had one, and handed it to the poor fellow. He drank from it with avidity.

"Who are you?" he asked, when he returned the flask to me.

"We are detectives," replied my companion, "come to investigate this mystery; and we rely upon you to tell us much that will prove useful. Now, what is your name? You must, at least, remember that."

But the man shook his head mournfully. Apparently his terrible experience had affected his brain.

"Tell me," I said suddenly—"it may help you to remember—tell me if you have ever heard of a man known as 'S.'"

"'S.'" the stranger cried in a voice that betrayed considerable emotion—" 'S.'; no, I have never heard of such a person." But I was convinced that he was not telling the truth, and I wondered why.

Now I knew a little about the mysterious "S.," something about the miserable "he," a few facts about the man whose telephone secrets I had overheard, and a few points about the stranger who had accompanied me to the Ealing house. But of this unfortunate creature I knew absolutely nothing. Apparently this was the case with the last-mentioned also, for he had remarked deliberately to me that he knew nothing about him, thus leaving me

to infer that he *did* know something about the dead man.

And now there was yet another mysterious circumstance in the case — the connection of the drugged captive with the various other parties concerned in the mystery. Was he shamming loss of memory? If not, why was he afflicted by the mention of the name "S."

"Oh, heavens!" cried the stranger suddenly, "I must get a breath of fresh air, or I shall faint. Already I am half-dead with worry and hunger. I will go and stand at the front door a minute."

The Scotland Yard man, who had been making an examination of the dead body, assented to the proposal, and, handling the bannisters carefully, the rescued captive crept downstairs.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" asked my companion, looking up to me in triumph, as though he had made an important discovery.

But I hardly heeded his question.

Whether I am of an unusually suspicious nature or not I cannot say, but something in the behaviour of the man we had released had led me to suspect him—of what, I cannot say.

"Here," I cried, "don't let that fellow go. I believe he would make off if he could. He is shamming loss of memory, I am confident."

The detective smiled in a superior sort of way, but, more keen-eared than I am, he leapt to his feet a moment later, and rushed down the stairs three at a time. I followed, wondering inwardly whether the man was mad.

There was no sign of the rescued one at the front door, which had been thrown open, but the sound of clattering hoofs fell upon my ear as I followed my companion, hatless, into the open air.

We looked in vain for our cab. It was gone, but we could just catch sight of it in the distance, speeding at a terrific pace down the hill.

Our rescued captive had bolted!

CHAPTER X

TWO RUNAWAYS

ASTONISHED and annoyed as I naturally was at the manner in which we had been hoodwinked by the released captive, my prevailing feeling, I must confess, was one of satisfaction that I alone had suspected this move on the part of the vanished man and that I had made myself even with the gentleman from Scotland Yard for outwitting me in the discovery of the lonely house. The cab had barely disappeared from view when I turned and regarded my companion with what was intended for a look of superior pity. To my surprise, he seemed in no way put out by the escape of the runaway. In fact, he was smiling peacefully as he produced a massively mounted cigar-case from his pocket, and selected a weed, before speaking.

"Now you've done it!" I remarked, somewhat angrily. "You have lost the only clue to the murder. That man could have solved the mystery for us."

Again the Scotland Yard man smiled.

"Really, Mr Merton," he drawled in reply, paus-

ing between the words to carefully light his cigar, "really, you take me for an amateur. I beg pardon, a—a fool. It is the habit," he proceeded significantly, "for a man of the world to take the number of the cab he employs."

"And have you the number of that cab?" I asked excitedly.

"Certainly. Haven't you?"

His bland, irritating smile told me plainly that he realised, as I did, that I had by no means turned the tables on him.

"How do you think," I asked, "he made the cabby take him?"

"A tip works wonders," replied my companion, "or perhaps the driver mistook him for one of us. Come, though, let us have another look upstairs."

In silence we returned, the Scotland Yard man leading the way.

"I wonder now," the latter murmured, as he lightly trod the staircase, "what that scoundrel has got to do with this case?"

"A deal more than you think," I felt inclined to reply.

Once again he bent over the corpse, when we reached the first landing, and I, by way of spending my time to what might be some advantage, made a thorough examination of the house. On the second floor there were two rooms—attics—both absolutely empty. In the one empty room on the first floor I also found nothing in the shape of a clue, or a vestige of one. The semi-furnished room in which the two forms, the living and the dead,

had been found was deserving of a more thorough search.

There was no bed in it, and no bedroom furniture. An old writing-desk was the principal ornament, and this I searched in vain for anything of consequence. There was a quantity of common writing paper in one drawer, a penholder much bitten, two or three unused "J." pen-nibs, and one that had been used frequently, an ink-well almost empty that was let into the desk, a few paper fasteners, and other writing necessities.

The room was black with dust and grime, but in the centre there was a clear space, no doubt caused by the struggles that must have preceded the crime, and those of the living captive whom we had rescued. It was impossible to recognise any distinct footprint for this reason—not that this mattered greatly, for footsteps are poor clues, for all the novelists may say.

The window of the room was closed and filthy, the dust on the window-sill pointing to the fact that the murderer had certainly not departed by that mode of exit.

The chairs in the room—two in number, and of the common, kitchen order—the empty, nameless packing-case in the corner, the old newspapers flung into another corner—all these were valueless as clues to the murder.

I turned and left the room to find my companion. He was no longer examining the corpse, but was seated on the stairs with a formidable budget of papers in his hand, evidently making notes.

Seeing me, he rose, pocketed the papers, and suggested that we should go downstairs. I asked if he had found any articles in the pockets of the deceased, and he showed me the stump of a pencil and a plain bone pen-knife. These he returned to the pocket. Certainly the clues were few in number and insignificant in nature. The case seemed as mysterious as ever, and the behaviour of the released captive had added yet another strange incident to a series of events as remarkable as one could wish for.

Downstairs I searched in vain for anything likely to be of assistance, but my companion, to my surprise, refused to assist in the search. On my asking his reason, he gave the absurd reply that the police would attend to that part of the business. As we stood at the front door, my fellow-investigator donning a stylish pair of gloves, I suddenly perceived that a man's face was peering over the bottom fence of the garden, in our direction.

Acting upon impulse, I took a step forward, and immediately the apparition disappeared.

"Only some inquisitive neighbour," remarked my companion, when I pointed it out to him ; but I could not help thinking differently.

Running forward, I threw open the gate of the garden, and rushed into the road. Before I had time to catch a glimpse of his features, a figure, hiding in the shadow, turned and fled madly down the hill. So rapidly did he run that I knew it would be hopeless for me to give chase. Had we still had the hansom it would have been different. As the

man ran it struck me that I had seen him before. On consideration, however, I decided that such was not the case. The figure showed a certain resemblance to that of the stranger with whom I had passed the greater part of the previous night, but I satisfied myself that it was not he.

Why, I wondered, did he fear that I should see him? What reason had he for shunning me so remarkably, and why had he peered over the garden wall with such caution, as though he had an uncommon interest in what was happening in the lonely house?

And then, like a blinding flash of lightning, an idea occurred to me, and I felt a cold shiver creep down my back.

“May the Lord have mercy on your soul!”

Those haunting words seemed to be muttered again and again by the empty air, as I wondered whether the man who was disappearing down the hill had been following me, whether he was one of those whose secrets I had stumbled upon, as though in the dark, and whose vengeance was to follow the revealing of their crime!

CHAPTER XI

THE THEORY OF SCOTLAND YARD

"YOU'RE a queer chap, Merton," observed the Scotland Yard man, as I returned to the porch in which he stood. "Surely you know that in a case of murder people haunt the scene of the crime for days after. That man was probably morbidly attracted by the rumour of crime, but does not wish it to be known that he takes such an interest in what does not concern him."

"How, pray, does he know of the murder, since even you were not aware of it until I told you?" I was annoyed by the man's callous behaviour, and spoke in a sarcastic tone.

"Ah, I forget that," he said coolly, and I congratulated myself that for the second time I had caught him napping.

"How shall we return?" he went on. "Shank's pony, I suppose, to Ealing Common Station, and the so-called underground to town."

"Thank you," I said, "but I do not intend returning to London just yet. There are people I wish to interview down here—"

"Oh, indeed, Mr Merton," he replied, sneering;

"you are going to interest yourself still further in this matter. May I ask why?"

"Because if the police are not going to do so thoroughly, I consider it my duty to attempt the solution of this mystery."

"The police know quite well how to deal with such matters, thank you, Mr Merton," was the reply, "better perhaps than amateurs. But let me tell you that in certain matters it is a mistake to interfere with the police, or be too forward. Mr Merton"—he dropped his voice, though there was no one near—"let me warn you to be careful. Have nothing to do with this case. You see the trouble you have already got into. Beware! I don't speak without reason. The less the public hears of this case the better. Come back to town with me. There are two cabmen to be interviewed, while nothing remains to be done down here. Listen! If you are wise you will not blab about the man who was chained to the corpse. It will only cause a public sensation, and I have reason for wishing that there should be none. Leave the matter to the local police. They will busy themselves about the affair.

"There will be the usual inquest, and the Press will take the matter up, but nothing much will come of it. That's what I want. A man being found dead in a practically empty house is nothing very strange, but for all that this case will baffle everyone, as it does you at present. I must request you to do as I say. I have reasons—good and sufficient reasons—for asking you to do as I wish. Come

away with me before the police arrive. There is a short cut across the fields that will, I reckon, bring us out on to the common."

But I refused to accompany him.

"What are you driving at?" I asked, dumfounded by his behaviour. "Why do you want to hush the matter up? What is the meaning of your suggestions?"

"I cannot explain them now," he said; and I saw that he was concerned by my refusal. "Tell me why you are so anxious to investigate the matter?"

"Because," I answered, hotly, "it is unnatural to allow the murderer of a wretched man, whose only crime is too great knowledge of certain guilty secrets, to escape without punishment. Do you know that if your behaviour were to be known to the world it would excite the rage of the public beyond measure. I refuse to countenance this hushing-up of a mysterious murder—a brutal crime—"

"How do you know it's a murder?" interposed my companion. "Listen, please. The Press, besides doing a great deal of good, does a great deal of harm. Therefore, I wish the details of the affair to be kept out of the papers as much as possible. Meanwhile, I can without hindrance pursue my investigations—and you can yours, discreetly—with-out the annoyance of interference from the public—do you see?"

"Yes, your explanation puts things before me in a different light. But why hide anything from the local police—"

"Because they will make mountains out of mole-hills."

"If you consider a horrible murder a 'molehill'—a mere nothing—I don't agree with you," was my reply.

"Again I ask you why you are so sure that this is a murder case?" observed the man from Scotland Yard.

"What do you think it is?" I responded, wondering how he could otherwise explain our discovery.

"Well, I allow that the case looks like one of murder to an untrained eye, and the local police will take it for granted that such it is."

"But what is it, really—at least, in your opinion?" I asked, returning the compliment he had paid me in his last observation.

"Mr Merton, you think me a fool, I see. Wait until the inquest, and hear what the doctors have to say, and then perhaps you will have a better opinion of me."

"What will they say?" I asked, with interest.

"They will say that the disfiguring mutilation was done after death."

"Good heavens, do you mean that it was not the cause of death?"

"Certainly not. And the inquest will also reveal the fact that no murder has been committed—at least, probably none."

"Suicide?" I suggested feebly.

"No; the doctors will say that *the deceased met his death by drowning!*"

CHAPTER XII

THE AGONY COLUMN

THIS startling piece of information—for recollecting the shrunken appearance of the dead man's body, I decided that my companion's suggestion had firm foundation—held me speechless for a moment or two.

Unconscious of the fact that the Scotland Yard man had again scored one, I stood wrapped in thought.

If the mystery had been profound before, how much more complicated had not the last discovery made it?

"You are quite sure of this?" I asked.

"Quite."

"Well, you agree with me that this is a deep mystery?"

"I confess that I do. I have never known such a case before. Now I am off to town. Are you coming?"

"No, I am going into the town, and shall there hire a bicycle. I want a ride and time to collect my wits."

"Quite so," replied my companion; and I knew his

remarks had reference to my last words ; "but you will promise me not to re-enter this house without me."

"I don't see why I should make any such promise, but I agree."

"Thank you," he said. "If you come down to the Yard to-night I will tell you the result of my interview with the cabman who drove you down here last evening, and the one who has carried off our friend this morning. Let me see, what is the address of this lonely residence ?"

We examined the gate-post (for we had been discussing thus in the garden of the house), and found a name printed on it, but almost rubbed away by the hand of time. It was "Bloemfontain House." The road, we eventually learned, was known as "Heath Rise."

The detective scribbled a note to the local police court, explaining the position of the house, and gave it with a sixpence to a lad whom we happened to meet at the foot of the hill. Incidentally I may mention that this lad was the first person who had come anywhere near the house during our visit, with the sole exception of the individual who had departed so hurriedly on seeing me. The road was a very quiet cul-de-sac, the house lonely in the extreme. "An excellent spot for a murder," my companion had remarked grimly.

At the foot of the hill we parted, cordially shaking hands. I made as though I would walk towards the town, but no sooner was the detective out of sight than I retraced my steps in the direc-

tion of a small house that stood alone almost at the foot of the hill on the summit of which stood that in which I had made the gruesome discovery.

I had promised not to re-enter the last mentioned house, but the Scotland Yard man had extracted no promise from me as to interviewing the nearest neighbour of the tenant of the lonely house. I had great hopes of learning something from the inhabitant of the cottage, if he or she were of an inquisitive nature.

A neatly-attired servant opened the door of the villa in response to my knock. My request to see "the master" did not, quite naturally I agree, satisfy her as to whether I had proper reasons for craving an interview with one of whose name I was not even aware. However, by the judicious tendering of a silver coin I was admitted to a bright sitting-room, which, I was pleased to find for very evident reasons, faced the road.

"The master's not down yet, sir," the girl informed me, "but if you'll take a seat and have a glance at the paper, I'll ask him to come down and see you."

A newspaper lay unopened on the table. When the maid withdrew, closing the door behind her, I casually picked it up and glanced down the Births, Marriages, and Deaths column. Finding nothing to interest me there, I ran my eye along the second column, devoted, for the most part, to "agonies" of the sickly and nonsensical order.

Suddenly a familiar name arrested my attention, and I was eagerly devouring a small paragraph

near the top of the column. This is what I read:—

"If the driver of the cab that carried two gentlemen to a house off Ealing Common last night will communicate immediately with Mr Harold Coxstein, Solicitor, 90x Broad Street, E.C., he will hear of something to his advantage.

The discovery of this paragraph startled me in more ways than one. Who had inserted it? Plainly my strange client of the previous night, who, no doubt, wished to bribe the cabman to silence as to where he drove his other fare after leaving me at Oxford Circus. But what for the moment excited my interest even more than the question of who inserted the advertisement, was that the name of the solicitor to whom the cabman was to apply was that of the lawyer who, as I had learned by chance, acted for Mrs Spenser and Carline! But, after a moment's thought, I satisfied myself that this could be only a coincidence.

A second paragraph that was of undoubted interest to me next caught my eye:—

"'S.' and the others.—Beware of S. F. M. I fear by this time he may know something—but not from me. Visited last night by 'V.,' I hear. What does it mean? Cave. 'R.'"

When the door of the room opened a moment or two later, and the master of the house entered, I was not at first aware of the fact. That second paragraph had recalled to my mind those awe-inspiring words that I had heard twice on the previous night. S. F. M. They were my

initials! This was no coincidence; the very fact that the message was to "S."—the unknown avenger, "S."—and others, alone told me that. And I, too, had been "visited last night." That was true. Was that paragraph my death-warrant? Alas, the tone of it suggested as much even had I never heard those dread words, "*May the Lord have mercy on your soul!*"

CHAPTER XIII

VISITORS TO THE LONELY HOUSE

"AH, good morning to you, my dear sir. I am always pleased to receive a visitor."

This greeting of my host roused me from my reverie, and, with a muttered apology, I rose to my feet.

"You will pardon this intrusion, I hope, Mr —," I began.

"Yemen," said my host, a dapper little man, noticeable for his sandy mutton-chop whiskers and blue dressing-gown. "Mr Nicholas Yemen, at your service."

"Well, Mr Yemen, I will briefly explain the object of my visit. There is a house near this charming residence, standing on the top of the hill—"

"There is; and it appears to be an object of interest to a number of people, sir," was Mr Yemen's reply.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, dozens of people have inquired here as to whether a certain gentleman lives there. Curiously enough, none of them ever know his name. I pre-

sumed you were yet another of his visitors when my servant told me you had asked only for ‘the master.’ I am rather interested in that house on the hill, do you know? I’ve a keen eye for anything mysterious, and if you want to know as much as any one in these parts does know of the house and its present tenant, you’ve come to the right man for help. You see,” he explained, apologising unnecessarily for his curiosity, “I’m a bit of an invalid—injured in a railway accident, sir, seven years ago—and obliged to keep quiet and not go out when it’s damp or rainy, in case the cold gets to my wound. Consequently, I spend most of my time at the window. Well, what is it you want to know about the house? That’s what you’ve come for, eh? Very good; then I’d best tell you all I know.”

My delight at finding such a genuine busybody as Mr Yemen was, as may be imagined, very great. I had hardly hoped for such luck.

“The present tenant of ‘Bloemfontain House,’ ” he began, “is an unusually tall man.” (I recognised the description, slight as it was, to be applicable to the dead man, and presumed that the mysterious “he” lived in the house on the hill.) “He has resided there, as we may so call it, for, let me see, about a month now. The house had been empty for a long time, with rather a bad reputation. The drains were believed to be in a shocking state, and it was said that the house was haunted—idle nonsense, you know, Mr—er—?”

“Jones,” I interposed, carefully concealing my

own name for fear that the man from Scotland Yard might visit Mr Yemen at some future period.

"Well, Mr Jones, the present tenant arrived about a month ago, with a few articles of furniture on a hand-cart—writing-desk and chairs, that's all I saw ; and, strange to say, but one thing has gone in since.

"The tenant, of course, does not live there. I suppose he uses the place as a kind of office. He isn't there every day, but when he is there sometimes he works all the morning and afternoon—seldom, though. More often he looks in for a few hours. When he comes out he will be in a different suit. I've seldom seen him well-dressed or been able to scan his features, but he appears to be a most mysterious creature. Never has any letters, sir, the postman informs me, but has the newspaper sent in daily. He takes the same paper as I do, sir—the *Daily Journal*."

I noted this fact with pleasure. The victim took the newspaper in which the members of the Secret Society, as I believed them to be, corresponded !

"His first visitor, sir, was a young man." He proceeded to describe this individual, and I was pleased to find that the description tallied with that of the man whom we had found chained to the corpse of the tenant of the lonely house.

"He's had visitors in plenty since then — both male and female—and for the most part they've come asking for a very tall, thin gentleman, others for 'Bloemfontain House,' — none for Mr

Whatever-his-name-is, which is curious, is it not, Mr Jones?"

Without waiting for my nod of agreement with him on the point, Mr Yemen continued :

"Yesterday he had more visitors than I've known him to have before. In the morning another piece of furniture—it was marked 'fragile,' but I can't say whether it was china or not—arrived in a packing-case. The tenant helped to carry it upstairs. The carman who brought it told me (this is strictly between us and the post, Mr Jones), that the house was in a filthy condition.

"Then in the afternoon the gentleman, whom I have already described as having been the first visitor, went up the hill, and he must have come back very late, for I sat here until dark yesterday, but saw nothing of him."

I carefully noted this remark, as will be understood. I almost felt that I was on the brink of a startling discovery. Mr Yemen was as good as any detective who might have been specially watching the house.

"Last night, when I was in bed, a cab drove up the hill (only once had one driven past here before), and, of course, I jumped out of bed in time to see it go by. There were two gentlemen inside. They stayed up there some time, then drove back pretty fast, but not so fast as a hansom did that took two more gentlemen up there this morning. I saw it tear by from my bedroom window."

I need hardly say that I knew more about the two visits from gentlemen in cabs than even om-

niscient Mr Yemen. But one thing astonished me. My informant made no mention of the visitor of the day before, who, if it was a case of murder, had committed that murder in the lonely house, and, in any case, must have drugged the earliest arrival, and chained him to the corpse of the drowned man (according to the detective), whom I had found in the empty house.

"Then no one else visited the house yesterday?" I ventured to ask Mr Yemen.

"No one else, as far as I am aware. Oh, but, goodness me, what a shocking memory I've got! Yes, two others passed this house on their way to the one we're interested in yesterday, late in the afternoon. They were together—"

"What were they like?" I asked, striving to conceal the interest I felt on this all-important point.

Little did I expect Mr Yemen's answer.

"Like? They were ladies—*two veiled ladies*, one quite young and the other probably elderly."

CHAPTER XIV

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF THE TENANT

MR YEMEN was either a most unobservant person (though to say so after chronicling my conversation with him seems ridiculous), or chanced to be much engrossed in his story at the moment when he startled me beyond description by making this announcement. At any rate he appeared not to notice my agitation on learning who the persons were that formed the link, so to speak, between two more or less distinct parts of the great mystery.

Now, I saw that my nocturnal visitors of the previous night were indeed connected with the tragedy of the hill-top house, and apparently more guiltily connected than any of the other participants in the strange business, since my genial informant distinctly assured me that no living creature other than those he had already mentioned had, so far as he was aware, passed his villa on the way up the hill. Perceiving how keen his watch had been, how he was fully aware of my two visits, and how apparently he had missed seeing none of the events at the empty house of which I was cognisant, I satisfied myself that it was as he said,

that the only visitors to the mysterious building at the top of the hill, excepting myself and companion, were the individual who had been chained to the dead tenant's body and the two veiled ladies, one young and pretty and the other old.

Pondering while Mr Yemen chatted on, the thought suddenly occurred to me—How did I know that the avenging “S.” was a man, might not that single letter stand for the name of a woman—in that case one of the two veiled ladies? Otherwise, how was it that Mr Yemen had not noted the arrival of “S.,” supposing him to be a man? Flashing across my mind came the recollection that in novels, at any rate, women play important parts in connection with secret societies. And I certainly decided that we were dealing with a secret society of the most pronounced, most cunning, and most blood-thirsty type. Could it be that those two veiled ladies were at the bottom of this empty house tragedy? If so, why had they arranged that nocturnal appointment with me? Why was I not only drawn into the dark business by the man whom I had accompanied to the Ealing house, but sought after by these other persons unknown, for a purpose equally mysterious?

I proceeded to put further questions to Mr Nicholas Yemen, in the hope that he might be able to throw more light on the dark places of which the affair was made up.

“I presume the tenant of the house spent yesterday indoors?” I said.

“Yes, so I suppose. He arrived in the morning

in his best clothes, and is evidently still in the house. At least, I have not seen him return."

"He arrived in his best clothes," I remarked to myself; "why, then, when found dead, was he clad in the commonest of garments?" Aloud I asked, "He is in the habit of appearing in different costumes, is he not?"

"He is. One might even say different disguises, for, unless I am much mistaken, I have not only seen him in both irreproachable walking costume, and at other times the garments of a manual worker, but also without and with a moustache in accordance with the outfit he had assumed."

"Indeed!" I remarked, though I confess that I was not surprised. From what I had gathered from the conversation through the telephone, the unknown "he," whom I believed to be the tenant of the lonely house, was going in fear for his life. He had evidently transgressed in the eyes of the society of which he was a member, and for fear of his "brothers in the cause," was compelled to lie low. In order to further his designs for avoiding his enemies, he resorted to a double personality, a kind of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde arrangement it seemed to me. If so, the probability was that he merely used the house on the hill as a place in which to change his costume. My readers may have heard how the secret police officials in Russia are provided with huts in different parts of the big towns, in which they are able to throw off one disguise, if they so require, in order to don another. One may enter, for instance, as a crippled beggar,

and emerge by another door as a fashionable, elderly "masher." It appeared to me probable that the mysterious man who lay dead in the lonely house had a dual personality. Perhaps he was in reality a man of good birth and social position, who had become entangled in the meshes of a society that seemed harmless until the new member was enabled to take that peep behind the scenes which so invariably disillusionises. He saw trouble ahead, and, perhaps being unable to cut himself entirely adrift from his former self, decided to spend his life in dual manner. The idea was fantastic, and perhaps nonsensical, but how else could I account for this disguising himself on the part of the dead man? One thing I could not but congratulate myself on discovering—I mean, the marvellous interest evinced by Mr Yemen in all that concerned the empty house. Yet, though an inquisitive person, I was surprised to find he made no endeavours to ascertain for what reason I had visited him, and whether he was justified in revealing the results of his vigilance to a stranger. This was rather remarkable, it occurred to me, but I easily explained it by suggesting to myself that he was so occupied by the narration of his story that he forgot his auditor was an acquaintance of only a few minutes' standing.

Mr Yemen had startled me with several of the points in his recital, but I could not help thinking that I was little nearer the solution of the mystery than before.

In addition to all the remarkable incidents of

the previous night, a new cause of perplexity that had arisen was the behaviour of the man from Scotland Yard. Was he, I wondered, trying to put me off the scent by his positive statement that the dead man had been drowned? Otherwise, supposing the deceased had, indeed, come by his death by such means, how was it that the corpse came to be found in the half empty house, chained to the drugged form of a mysterious stranger? Why, too, should the official detective wish to throw me off the scent? Perhaps in order that he himself might reach the solution of the mystery. The probability of this being the case was, however, doubtful.

My head was in a whirl. My unfortunate position was that I knew too much, that is a little, about too many different things. I realised that a smattering of knowledge is often worse than none at all. The man from Scotland Yard started his investigation with more or less of a blank mind. I am sure he rejected the idea that what I had heard through the telephone, and the fact of my being visited by the veiled ladies, were matters having any bearing upon the tragedy of the empty house. Yet, in spite of this, the young official from Scotland Yard had evidently made some discovery of which I was not aware. Otherwise, how had he reached his conclusion that the matter must be hushed up. Again I considered the probability of his peculiar behaviour being a cloak to cover that commonest of evils, professional jealousy. On the other hand, might he not have

seen something that had revealed to him what I knew nothing about?

When I recollect that he had, unwatched by me, searched the deceased's pockets, a conviction that he knew more than he appeared to, formed itself in my mind.

Was it possible, I wondered, that those sheets of paper I had seen in his hand, as he stood by the corpse, were not leaves from his note-book, but important documents discovered in the dead man's pocket?

CHAPTER XV

THE EQUALLY STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF CARLINE SPENSER

"STANLEY, is it you? How sweet of you to come up to see us."

It was Carline who spoke. After leaving Mr Nicholas Yemen and prosecuting further inquiries in the neighbourhood without success, I had returned to town, and, as it was still early, had repaired to my dear one's house and been greeted thus. But I must state that I detected something in her manner that belied her expressions of pleasure at seeing me.

"Now you must tell me what you mean by putting off your visit last night," she proceeded with a vivacity that, though charming to a degree, appeared to me to be a trifle forced. I was over-suspicious, that was the secret of the whole thing; but that my suspicions should be directed against the girl who was all the world to me seems somewhat absurd, and I might even say brutal, on my part.

I can only plead in excuse that the recollection of those two veiled ladies would not leave my

mind. Two veiled ladies, one elderly and the other young and pretty. Mr Yemen had been unable to describe them with any further details than those supplied me by the porter at our offices, save in respect of their height. The younger of the two, according to that inquisitive little gentleman, was of medium height, but the older lady was very short. I think I have already mentioned that Mrs Spenser was a particularly short woman.

This time, on entering the house, I had not thrown off the rôle of the detective, and assumed, as I generally did, that of the young man whose fancy (though the season was winter) was that adopted by most young men exclusively in the spring months. Why, I cannot say, unless it was because I wished to question Carline as to the male shadow on the window blind. Let it not be thought for one moment that these intentions were prompted by feelings of jealousy. I never for one instant doubted my darling's love for me, or her fidelity, but I must say that I *did* wonder whether the tragedy of the lonely house had any possible connection with the presence of that man engaged with Mrs Spenser at so unearthly an hour, or whether those veiled ladies—but how I could entertain such ideas when I had reached the conclusion that, unless the Scotland Yard man was right as to the victim having been drowned, those two veiled ladies were responsible for the awful crime, I do not know. Carline's behaviour, however, prevented me from forgetting the object of my visit. Without deliberation I determined for the present to refrain

from revealing the whole story of my adventures of the previous day.

"I was very sorry to have to put you off," I said, seating myself in an arm-chair in the bright little drawing-room, "but business is business, is it not, and I was at work all night."

"All night, Stanley?" she asked, then stopped suddenly.

"Yes; why not?" I said quickly, noticing that she seemed unusually interested in my apology.

"Oh, nothing," was her reply, "I was only thinking that it was rather unusual for you to have so much to do, dear. Was it very important work, Stanley?"

"Very important and very unpleasant," I responded.

"Unpleasant? Nothing — nothing dangerous?" was Carline's somewhat remarkable query.

"Dangerous?" I repeated. "Why should you think so?"

"I did not see how otherwise it could be unpleasant," she faltered. The remark did not satisfy me. Why had she imagined that it was dangerous? Did it not look as though she knew something about the real danger to which I believed I was exposed? Her question reminded me unpleasantly of what, in the excitement consequent upon hearing Mr Yemen's story, I had forgotten. What brought back to me the memory of those sinister words of threat, even more vividly than the question, was the sight of a doubled up newspaper on one of the tables. It was the identical paper containing

the message that concerned me, and which I had read at Mr Yemen's. Was this merely coincidence?

"Stanley," murmured Carline at last, after a pause of some minutes duration; "Stanley, there is something troubling you, is it not so? Tell me, dear, what it is, or are you only tired after working all night? You seem so cold, so—so suspicious to-day, so unlike your dear, usual self!"

"Carline," I replied, "I am troubled! Business is bothering me, and—something else."

"What?" she cried anxiously, and I did not fail to notice the expression of alarm that was visible on her lovely features.

"I want to know," I said quietly, "who the man is that was engaged with your mother this morning at an hour when most respectable people are in bed and asleep?" I spoke more bluntly—perhaps it was almost cruelly—than I had intended. It was because the look on her face plainly told me that what I knew was a subject that she had not wished me to know anything about.

"Man?" she gasped, exercising but little control over herself, "man engaged with mother this morning? How do you know anything about this, if you spent the hours of darkness at work?"

"I know," I answered, "because those little birds of the air that we read of in Scripture have carried your secret to me, Carline; yes, the secret you would have hid from me, who am privileged to know all your secrets, and from whom you should hide nothing."

She lay back in her chair, almost trembling under

my plain-spoken rebukes. Though her face was very pale and her bosom heaved convulsively, I thought, even in the moment of my excitement, that I had never seen her look so beautiful. Had I not considered what weighty issues perhaps hung on her reply, I know that the lover would have asserted himself, and I should have flung myself at her feet, begging her forgiveness for my harsh words, and craving the kiss that would mend the matter, and change her tears to smiles in an instant of time. As it was, I controlled myself.

"I am waiting to hear your answer," I said, and there seemed to be a thickening in my throat that might have been the precursor of a bad cold, but was not. So saying, I rose and picked up my hat to show what my intentions were unless I received a satisfactory answer.

"Stanley," she said, as I did so, "don't be so silly, darling, or so severe. A distant relation of mother's, an old friend, whom she had not seen for years was passing through London, and had to catch an early train to Scotland this morning. He dined with us last night, and left here this morning before any of the servants rose. That is the person whom you refer to, though I don't know how you came to hear of his visit."

And though she smiled sweetly as she called me an old silly for being so jealous, it did not escape my observation that she never once looked me straight in the face, as she might have been expected to do. I felt a sinking feeling within me. Was she, my loved one, my Carline, deceiving me? *If so, why?*

CHAPTER XVI

THE INGENUITY OF THE STRANGER

THERE seemed so much to do that I hardly knew where to begin. The most trying ordeal, however, was now over, and though I was by no means entirely satisfied with Carline's explanation of the shadow on the blind, I congratulated myself on the fact that I had at least done as much as mortal man could do to penetrate my sweetheart's secret—if she really had one.

Leaving the house in Maida Vale without much further conversation with Carline, and without even seeing her mother, I made my way towards New Scotland Yard.

The young detective from whom I had parted in the morning had given me his card, on which were printed the words "Wallace Negrett." On presenting this to a constable when my destination was reached, I was ushered into a small, bare room, where my late companion presently joined me.

He looked me up and down hastily before speaking.

"Ah, good evening," he drawled, "you have come about that Ealing business? Quite an ordinary affair, as you may have found out, eh?"

I was astounded at the fellow's audacity.

"If you have found it so," I observed hotly, "perhaps you will give me the whole explanation of the 'simple affair.'"

"Certainly," replied Negrett, to my astonishment.

"Let us presume that the deceased, as you were smart enough to discover," he began, and I noticed that there was an atmosphere of sarcasm about his tone, "is the member of a secret society. He has the misfortune to be drowned. Perhaps you will decide that he was drowned, intentionally. In either case, it is necessary for the other members of the society to take charge of his body. Perhaps there are papers on him which are of value to them, or maybe there is some sign tatooed on his body which will lead to the discovery of the society—I have known such cases before now. By some means the members recover the body and remove it to the house of one of their number, and, perhaps, while engaged with their secrets, they are interrupted by the appearance of a harmless individual whose presence is easily accounted for by the fact that there is a board still attached to the house on the hill announcing that local estate agents will be glad to remove its name from their books. The society does not wish to spill blood unnecessarily. Accordingly, having no intention of returning to the house in which the corpse is to be left, the members make tracks for their respective homes, leaving the intruder, drugged and fastened by handcuffs, which I note, by the way, are not of the regulation police pattern, to the dead body. The fantastic idea of

chaining the living to the dead was probably the outcome of the discovery that no suitable piece of furniture was to be found to which the prisoner could be secured. There, Mr Merton, is the solution of your mystery."

"And a highly unsatisfactory one," I did not hesitate to reply. Knowing what I now did from Mr Yemen about the remarkable behaviour of the tenant of the lonely house, I could easily see that Negrett's story "wouldn't wash," as the saying is. In the first place, the man chained to the corpse had visited the dead man some days before meeting with the terrible experience in which we were his rescuers. Again, the drowning episode was accounted for in an absurdly weak manner. But there was a certain vague semblance of probability about the official detective's solution of the profound mystery that caused me to wonder whether, no doubt by mere chance, Negrett had struck at something like the right explanation of the affair. However, rather than set down the young man's hasty and clumsy deduction as his best effort at solving the secret of the grim tragedy, I determined, in my own mind, that he was either endeavouring to throw me off the track, or, at any rate, was disguising something from me.

"You saw the advertisements in the *Journal*?" I asked, changing the subject, after showing some pretended signs of agreeing with Negrett as to the probability of his story.

"Yes, I saw an ad. that seemed to concern the case—one about a cabman who would hear of

something to his advantage if he applied to a certain city solicitor."

"And did you take any steps—?" I began, when my companion interrupted.

"Yes, I visited the manager of the advertising department of the *Journal* and learned from him that the ad. in question had been brought in very early this morning, just, in fact, as the paper was going to press. The manager even told me that he would not have accepted the ad. at such an hour, in spite of the bearer's urgent request that it should be inserted, had not a second alleged important agony advertisement been received about the same time."

This last piece of intelligence interested me almost as much as the first. The second advertisement was, without doubt, the one addressed to "'S' and others."

"And who was it that brought the first advertisement?" I asked.

"Well, that's rather a queer point in the matter. The manager quite surprised me when he stated that it was none other than a cabman who handed in the letter containing the 'copy' for the ad."

"What was the cabman like?" I asked, equally surprised at the information.

"Tall, quite young, and wearing a Newmarket coat and a top hat."

I stifled what would have been a forcible expression of my feelings.

"As I might have expected," I muttered half aloud, "the stranger was artful enough to change cabs before reaching home."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SECOND CABMAN'S EVIDENCE

"YOUR fellow passenger to Ealing is a clumsy fellow," remarked Negrett after a pause. "When he discovered that he had failed to cover up his traces sufficiently, and realised that we should, if we wished to find out his home, have no difficulty in doing so from the cabman, he sent another cab off with the ad. which would assure the first cabman's silence. He forgot that the second "Jehu" was able to give equally good evidence to the police. Of course, I have advertised for this man—privately—and hope to-morrow to learn from where the letter containing the advertisement was sent. You see, it appears to me to be like this: Your friend carelessly forgets to bribe the cabman who took you to Ealing sufficiently to make that gentleman hold his tongue. He discovers his mistake when, after carefully changing cabs somewhere, he reaches home. He then despatches that advertisement, hoping to thus get an opportunity of squaring the cabman before the police interview him. He does not recollect, however, that we shall learn from

the second cabby the district from which he was sent—”

“Unless,” I broke in, “as is more than probable, he squared that gentleman on the spot.”

“Exactly,” muttered Negrett, mortified that I should have pointed out this possibility to him.

“And what about the solicitor; did you interview him?” I next asked.

“Tried to,” was the reply of my companion, “but failed. These solicitors are devillish cunning. Our man has two doors to his room, and slipped out of one, I feel confident, as I was ushered into the other. However, I tipped his clerk to find out whether a cabman had called this morning, and was told that no such individual had. Of course, we can’t accept the fellow’s word as gospel truth. Lawyers’ clerks, I have heard, can command princely salaries if they are proficient in the art of —well, deviating from the truth. This man in particular was probably an adept. One thing I did learn from the clerk. It will interest you more than it does me. The old fellow—he’s one of the typical bewhiskered, spectacled lawyer’s clerks —was working on some important business until a very late hour last night. He told me the story in strict confidence and in exchange for the gift I bestowed upon him. At about half-past ten two strangers appeared to interview the solicitor (who had, of course, departed) on important business. They had heard of him, they said, from a mutual friend, whose name did not transpire, and happening to pass, and seeing a light in the office window,

they had ventured to look in on the chance of finding the lawyer at work. They seemed disappointed to hear he had gone, and at once withdrew."

"Who were they?" I asked. And again the answer that had followed one of my questions to Mr Nicholas Yemen astonished me as it fell from Negrett's lips.

"Those two veiled ladies of whom you have spoken before now," said the young man; "one old and short, the other young and apparently pretty. Fancy a lawyer's clerk noticing a woman's looks—"

But I did not listen to Negrett's further remarks. I was deep in thought.

Those veiled ladies seemed to be everywhere. They had evidently repaired to the solicitor's office—the Spencers' solicitor, note you—after finding that I had failed to keep the appointment with them. Ergo, the solicitor, was probably another person concerned in the mystery. Otherwise, why should he be selected? Was it to transact the business that had originally been intended for me?

One fact, however, that impressed itself upon me delighted my heart beyond measure. The veiled ladies could not, as I had suspected, be Mrs Spenser and Carline. Thank heaven for that! The old clerk would not have failed to recognise them had they been his employer's regular clients as I knew the Spencers to be. He would have penetrated their disguising veils without a doubt.

I had barely satisfied myself on this point when

there came a fresh discovery to puzzle me all the more, to re-waken my suspicions about those mysterious ladies, and to recall what I had seen on one of the window blinds of the Spensers' house.

Negrett had been called out a moment before, and now returned with an expression of utmost pleasure and triumph on his juvenile features.

"By a bit of luck," he said gleefully, "one of our men has run the second cabby to earth, and learned where he was given the letter containing the agony notice for the *Journal*. It appears that a young man of gentlemanly appearance, save as regards his dress, which was as described by you, rushed out of a house as the cabby was passing at the pace known as 'crawling.' Giving detailed instructions, he paid him with half-a-crown, and sent him off."

"Where was the house?" I asked breathlessly.

"In Aubrey Square, Maida Vale," replied Negrett nonchalantly.

To him the locality meant nothing, but the reader will perceive, as I did to my dismay, that *the name of the square was that of the one in which Mrs Spenser and my Carline lived!*

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF SCOTLAND YARD

THE Scotland Yard man did not appear to notice the agitation I must have evinced on receiving this important item of information. That the discovery pleased him I did not fail to notice. Yet why? If, as he had hinted to me several times, he intended leaving the matter in the hands of the despised local police force, why did he appear so interested in the discovery of yet another link in the shadowy chain we were but starting to forge?

I almost forgot my genuine concern at the startling discovery revealed by the second cabman's evidence in the contemplation of the behaviour of Mr Negrett. He was playing some underhand game, I felt convinced. He wished to get rid of me in order that the field might be left open to him alone. Representing, as he did, the highest branch of the police force in the country, it was extraordinary, to say the least of it, that he should endeavour to hush the matter up, as he was undoubtedly doing. What was the secret of Scotland Yard?

Mr Negrett had made a discovery. Unless I was

much mistaken, this discovery and the papers I had seen in his hand at the lonely house were synonymous—the one was the result of a perusal of the other. If the discovery were merely a clue to the identity of the victim, or to that of the murderer, Negrett would surely know more of the affair than he appeared to do. No, that discovery was apparently one that either affected himself personally or was of such an important character that he dared not confide it to me. The first of these two cases being absurd, I was left to ruminate over the probability of the second, and await developments. For the present I decided it would be better to keep discreetly silent as to my conversation with Mr Nicholas Yemen. The results of my interview with that gentleman, important though they seemed, had, however, not conducted to the clearing up of any part of the mystery.

There still remained so much to be done that I determined to waste no more time with Mr Negrett. It was very important, first of all, starting from the commencement of the series of mysterious circumstances connected with the case, to ascertain whether any woman was reported to the police as missing. If I succeeded in discovering the identity of the unhappy female referred to in that memorable telephonic conversation, and whose cries I had fancied I heard, I should, I felt sure, have made a good start. For, to begin with, by tracing her from where she was last seen, I might be so successful as to find out the whereabouts of her place of detention. By so doing I should be also discover-

ing the house from which the mysterious individual had spoken through the telephone to his equally mysterious friend. This discovery should form the key to the whole affair, for I had gathered from that telephone conversation that the speaker was himself the principal or chief of the supposed society responsible for the tragedy of the lonely house. Not only could this person inform me—under pressure, of course—who comprised the gang, but his evidence, once obtained, would probably lead to the apprehension of the terrible creature, "S." whose coming, according to my reasoning, had resulted so fatally for the tenant of the house on the hill.

In discovering all this, I should, I hoped, also penetrate the secret of my Carline, though I dreaded to think what exposure of that secret might mean to me and to her. For with reference to her participation in the affair (it appeared only too evident a one), I concluded thus: The stranger, who had accompanied me down to Ealing on the previous night was, I believed, deeply concerned in the mystery of the lonely house. He had hinted at a knowledge of my relations with Carline Spenser. On leaving me he had made an unsuccessful series of manœuvres to throw a possible pursuer off his track, but had failed, leaving me to discover that he had ultimately returned to a house in Aubrey Square. Carline and her mother occupied a house in Aubrey Square! The stranger, presuming that he had repaired to the Spensers' house, should have reached there about two o'clock in the early morn-

ing. Soon after this hour I had perceived a man's shadow on the blind, the presence of which had been explained unsatisfactorily by Carline. The deduction was, of course, that the stranger who had accompanied me to the scene of the tragedy had returned for some mysterious purpose to the Spencers' house. To my mind, it seemed possible that he was even now lurking in the Aubrey Square mansion !

Thus it will be seen that I had two clear courses to choose between. I could either start with an attempt to learn the identity of the woman held in restraint by the principal of the supposed society, or try to unravel the secret that Carline seemed to be holding back from me. There was also the possibility of obtaining some important information from Mr Coxstein, the solicitor who both acted for the Spencers and was the advertised party to whom the cabman that drove the stranger and myself to Ealing should apply. I felt that the probability of my being able to "pump" the legal gentleman was doubtful. It would be easier to extract the secret from Carline herself than from her legal adviser.

Before leaving Scotland Yard I instituted inquiries as to the women who were reported as missing at the time, and managed to obtain a rough list, which I carefully copied for future reference.

As I was leaving, Mr Negrett tapped me on the shoulder.

"What are you intending to do, Mr Merton?" he asked quietly.

"Move heaven and earth to penetrate this mystery more thoroughly than you have done," I replied briskly.

A dark frown wrinkled the young man's brow.

"Be sensible, my friend," he muttered; "throw the business up—it's nothing to do with you. You can't hope to make anything out of it."

"My motives," I replied coldly, "are not so mercenary as you may think. And if you wish to get all the credit in the business, well, you'll find I won't deprive you of it. I have all-sufficient reasons for wishing to obtain a solution of this mystery, and, in spite of you, I will not hesitate to continue as I am doing until I have shed some light on the dark places. And," I added, "part of my self-set task will be to discover why you wish me to abstain from further investigation."

The young man made no reply for a moment. My last words seemed to have disturbed him, and I fancied he muttered something that would be construed in the light of an expletive.

"I feel sure," I pursued, "that your behaviour is not the result of professional jealousy, for whereas I am a poor, inexperienced amateur at this kind of work, I find that you are the man who attained such unqualified success in the case of the Farloe forgeries."

"What do you know about the Farloe forgeries?" exclaimed Negrett, so suddenly and in tones of such undoubted interest that I could not fail to marvel at his behaviour. "What do you know about the Farloe forgeries?" he repeated.

I refused to reply to his question, as he would have wished. And I had good reason for my refusal. An idea, startling as it seemed on the face of it improbable, had flashed across my brain, and I left Mr Negrett gently cursing at my reticence. I felt, as I passed out of his presence, that in our encounter I had become quits with him, for the subject of the famous forgeries seemed to interest—nay, to concern—him so greatly for no apparent reason that I was almost decided in my mind that the affair of the lonely hill-top house was some strange sequel to the case in which Mr Wallace Negrett had won a fame quite incompatible with his age and experience.

To be sure, the plot was thickening, as they say in Adelphi dramas.

CHAPTER XIX

GUARDED THREATS

THOUGH the hour was an advanced one, I felt no inclination to return to my humble lodging on leaving Mr Negrett and Scotland Yard. Consequently, after appeasing the cravings of the inner man (the unhappy creature had not been fed since the early morning, when I had frugally and hastily breakfasted at a street cab-shelter), I made my way to Fenchurch Street, in the hope of finding Rodney, my partner, there, to whom I intended to explain that I wished to take a few days' holiday. I had no idea of confiding in him to any extent, for, though my partner was a good fellow, he was not what I considered one of my friends. It is not necessary, as many of my readers will have learned by experience, for one's partner to be one's friend. It is almost preferable that a partner should not be a bosom friend for reasons too evident to need explanation.

It was necessary, however, for me to hint at some possible work, for I knew that Rodney would indulge in the grumble so dear to his heart. It is a noticeable fact that the partner who spends half

his time at leisure is always the one to grumble when the real worker mentions the word "holiday."

I was not surprised to find him absent at the hour when I reached our office. There were, however, abundant traces of his presence in the careless way in which things had been left. Untidy as he invariably was, he seemed to have made an even greater mess than usual that day. Papers were thrown all over the desks and floor. The drawers, both of his writing-desk and mine, had been taken out and not returned.

Among the unopened letters on my table was one addressed in his own handwriting.

"Sorry to put you out," ran the note, "but an unexpected piece of business unconnected with our partnership has made it necessary for me to leave for the Continent to-day. I shall not, in all probability, see you again, so good-bye.—R."

The note in itself was more than remarkable, but what astonished me more than the letter itself was a postscript carefully engrossed at the foot of the half-sheet of paper used for the communication. It took the form of part of a well-known quotation, reading thus:—

"Silence is golden."

The sight of the words almost dazed me. Could it be that Rodney knew something about the mystery that was puzzling me? How else could I explain that suggestive quotation?

The words, preferable though they were to the others, reminded me of the more sinister ones pronounced by the stranger who had accompanied

me to Ealing. What did Rodney know of the secrets I had by chance stumbled upon the previous night?

The sight of that single initial at the end of both letter and postscript gave me the clue. A man, if he signs a letter or note in brief, uses the combination of letters that represents the initials of his names. I knew that Rodney had invariably signed himself in brief "A. R." Why, then, did he now drop the former initial? At first I imagined I must be becoming over-suspicious (perhaps not unnaturally) when I noted the similarity of name abbreviation in the cases of my late partner and of the avenging creature of mystery known by the single initial "S." Then I recollect the paragraph I had seen in the agony column of the *Journal*. If I recollect right, it read thus:—

"'S.' and the Others.—Beware of S. F. M. I fear by this time he may know something—but not from me. Visited last night by 'V.' I hear. What does it mean? Cave. 'R.'"

To my mind there remained little doubt but that Rodney was the author of the warning communication—the "R." who informed "S. and the others" that they must beware of me!

I began to see a dim light in the far distance. Rodney was a member of the society concerned in the tragedy of the lonely house!

Believing that I had discovered the secret the members of the society shared, he had first warned his fellow-members, then taken flight. The idea

that, speaking metaphorically, I had been nursing a serpent in my breast was appalling. No wonder, I thought, that the mystery had seemed to centre round myself when my partner in business was one of those most concerned in the dark affair, while I had, alas! strong and well-founded suspicions of the equally guilty connection of one whom I had hoped ere long to make my partner in another undertaking.

At any rate, Rodney's departure had assured me of one thing. The society must evidently consider my supposed knowledge vitally dangerous to their cause and to themselves; and because Rodney himself was, from their point of view no doubt, coward enough to fly from the suspicion of danger, it did not follow that the remaining members would do likewise. Were they all of my late partner's kidney, the threatened punishment for my exposure of their secret could hardly be carried out, as the stranger had so grimly suggested that it would in pronouncing those haunting words, "May the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

Though the vendetta had not yet been attempted, though there had as yet been no suspicion of danger beyond the mere presence of the runaway man outside the gate of the house on the hill, still, unless all I had read of secret societies and their *modus operandi* was much exaggerated, I could not at the moment consider myself free from danger.

One thing was quite clear. The members of the secret society probably imagined that the game was up. They had feared that the tenant of the lonely

house would reveal their secret, and, to ensure his silence, there had been the terrible visitation of the man "S." Now Rodney had warned them that I was a possible source of danger to them. *Would they take the same desperate steps to command my silence?*

CHAPTER XX

THE REPORTER'S DISCOVERY

I AM neither a bold nor a brave man, and I confess that when matters appealed to me in this light my first inclination was to take the advice of Mr Negrett, of Scotland Yard, and leave well alone (such an expression, by the way, is somewhat absurd in this connection). Even the knowledge that some unavenged crime had been committed might not have been a sufficient inducement to me to risk my life (as I fully believed I was doing) by pursuing the clues I have been fortunate enough to alight upon, and thus assist the ends of Justice, which, personified by Mr Negrett, appeared to take so callous a view of the Ealing tragedy.

But the fact of my poor Carline's undoubted connection with the series of mysteries held me spell-bound to the case. I dared not throw it up when she was concerned. As yet, I felt that I was ahead of the police as regards knowledge of the circumstances thereof. It would never do to allow them to entertain any suspicion of my fiancée's entanglement in the meshes of the dark business. Were I fortunate enough to penetrate her secret first, it

might be possible for me, when I exposed the whole affair, to screen her from even a breath of suspicion. And for this purpose alone, and meditating thus, I determined not to leave a stone unturned in exploring the black depths of the tragedy of the hill-top villa.

Leaving the office in the untidy state in which I found it, I made my way out into the street, emerging into Fenchurch Street as a flying form, whence emerged the raucous cry inseparable from the evening newspaper vendor, brushed past me.

I purchased a paper eagerly, for on the bill that the lad carried I perceived words that instantly arrested my attention.

“EMPTY HOUSE TRAGEDY AT EALING.— STARTLING DISCOVERY.”

The omniscient reporter had apparently lost no time in furnishing his paper with sensational “copy,” for a prominent position was occupied by the news that interested me more than all the rest put together, and half a column, well-leaded and cross-headed in the most important parts, was the space allotted by a generous sub-editor to the item.

I will merely quote a portion of the report of the tragedy, the opening paragraphs merely detailing the discovery by the local police of a battered corpse in a room in a semi-deserted house at Ealing. Foul play, of course, was suspected.

“The house, which has a bad reputation, has recently been occupied by a mysterious individual whose connection with the crime is apparently a close one.”

This observation startled me somewhat. What did the reporter mean by announcing that the victim of the tragedy was closely connected with the crime? The remark appeared superfluous, not to say absurd.

"The appearance of the corpse is remarkable in the extreme. Foully murdered, as the unknown victim must have been, the exact form of death met by the unhappy man, and the period that has elapsed since the crime was carried out, are as yet unknown, and some startling medical evidence may be expected at the inquest, to be held to-morrow."

But what was to me the most astounding part of the whole report, which, if reliable, would upset all my careful calculations, was contained in the last paragraph of the report, which ran as follows:—

"A particularly valuable piece of information has been supplied to us by one, the position of whose house in the vicinity of the scene of the tragedy makes his evidence of no small importance. It is that the dead man is not, as the police were first led to believe, the nameless tenant of the house, but one somewhat similar to him in build, whom the witness has never seen to pass his house on the way to that in which the discovery was made. It should be stated that our informant's villa must be passed by every visitor to the house where the murder was committed. Moreover, our informant, a Mr Nicholas Yemen, distinctly states that he observed the unknown tenant of the house in the neighbourhood this morning. Since the police are naturally under the impression that this tenant will know more than any one else about the tragedy,

it is expected that a search for him will be immediately instituted. Whether or no he will prove to be the criminal it would be out of place for us to suggest at this early stage, but a good deal of explanation is necessary before public suspicion will be directed elsewhere than on him."

Here was a startling discovery. Not only was the victim of the tragedy *not* the unknown tenant of the lonely house, but he had never been known to pass Mr Yemen's villa on his way to that in which he apparently met his death. What did it all mean? Would it be necessary for me to start my investigations from the beginning again? At any rate, Mr Yemen's evidence would, I felt sure, draw much attention to the matter. The mystery was becoming one in every sense of the word ; and now I realised regretfully that I was competing with the second great police force of London—the fourth estate, otherwise the noble army of Pressmen.

But the fact that there were now numerous other competitors in the field did not tend to alter my intentions as regards the investigation of the great mystery I had set myself to solve. Rather it braced me up to further efforts.

The list of missing women I had obtained from Scotland Yard first occupied my attention when I reached home at a late hour on the night following my weird experiences at Ealing—and elsewhere. It will be seen that I intended starting from the source of all the mysterious circumstances—the house in which he who was evidently the president of the unknown society held in restraint an unfor-

tunate woman who could do naught but scream for the help that presumably never came. I considered that I was safe, by the way, in imagining that the woman had been kidnapped (for some unknown purpose); otherwise, supposing she were a member of the society, why should she be held captive? Plainly because her offence was that of the man who had been visited by "S." with the result that I now gathered was even more thickly shrouded in mystery than before. If this were the case, if the captive female were one of the members of the gang, I could not hope to succeed in attaining my object by starting from this suggested point. If, however, as was perhaps more probable, she had been abducted for some as yet unknown purpose, the chances were that I should learn something about her. There would be friends who had lost sight of her, and so on. I say that this seemed the more probable likelihood, so to speak, of the two, for if death were the punishment for betrayal of the society's secrets in one case, why not also in the other, instead of imprisonment?

The reader will probably wonder why I determined to start my inquiry from this point when I was inclined to believe that I might learn much of what I wished to discover from my fiancée, Carline herself.

The fact was that I dared not interview Carline! I feared to learn the inevitable. Though I felt only too convinced that she was connected by fetters of guilt with the tragedy of the lonely house, I still clung to the faint hope that I was mistaken—nay,

wronging her—in directing my suspicions against the inhabitants of No. 4 Aubrey Square, and because there glimmered that ray of hope in my inward heart I was afraid to visit Carline lest what I might learn in the ensuing interview on the subject should extinguish that hope for ever.

CHAPTER XXI

THE VANISHED LADY

THE first individual of the female sex described in the list of missing persons supplied by the police was :

"(1) Mary Ann Harker, widow, a deaf mute, clothed," etc., etc.

This good woman was plainly out of the question, since a deaf mute could hardly be expected to annoy her captors by screaming.

"(2) Jane Pope, married woman, residing at 940 Matthews' Rents, Sansom's Alley, Gray's Inn Road. Shabbily costumed in black, and wearing heavy jet earrings. Last seen outside the Waterloo Arms, Harrison Road."

This lady, though not necessarily out of the question was unlikely to prove to be the individual for whom I sought. Her disappearance, to my mind, seemed accounted for by the suggestive statement as regards the locality in which she was last seen. The inside of a police station is frequently the resort of persons reported by beloved friends as "missing."

"(3) Agnes Golightly, aged 13"—appeared as impossible a person as No. 1.

No. 4 was no better, being—

“Martha Elizabeth Queen, imbecile, missing from the “Imbeciles’ Home, Upper Clapton.” It was hardly probable that a secret society should have any reason to detain in confinement a lunatic. I therefore passed on to the next.

“(5) Evelyn Arthur, spinster, aged 22, a respectably attired young girl, missing since last Monday, when she left home with her fiancé. Latter also reported missing.”

Another disappointment. The facts, scanty though they were, surely pointed to an elopement on the part of Evelyn Arthur and her fiancé.

“(6) Jessamine Victoria Siscombe, aged 29,” was the next on the list, and when I read the description following the name I almost cried aloud with childish delight, which was, perhaps, forgiveable under the circumstances.

“A good deal of information is supplied,” ran the report, “with reference to this young lady’s disappearance. She left her home in Malmesbury Terrace, Regent’s Park, last Tuesday, informing her mother that she intended taking a short walk. Apparently, though, she proceeded direct to Baker Street Station, where she was seen by a friend to purchase a second-class ticket to Ealing. She is known to have alighted at Ealing Station, where she was met, according to the evidence of a porter, by an unusually tall man, with whom she appeared to be on intimate terms, though her mother is aware of no friend of the young lady’s answering to this description. Apparently the two spent the afternoon together, for a few hours

later they reappeared at the Great Western station, and the lady started on her homeward journey in a first-class carriage. The gentleman accompanying her then left the station."

These few facts left me little doubt but that I had at last started my investigation on something more than the mere conjecture that had formed the greater part of my work heretofore.

Had I made this last discovery before reading the newspaper report on the affair of the lonely house, I should have jumped to the conclusion that Miss Jessamine Victoria Siscombe was the mysterious "S." who I believed to be responsible for the death of the victim of the Ealing tragedy; for the description of the man who had spent the afternoon with the vanished young lady left no doubt in my mind that that individual and the tenant of the hill-top house, who had been thus briefly described by Mr Yemen, were one and the same person.

But if, indeed, the said tenant were not the victim of the crime, but, as the newspaper hinted, one of the perpetrators of it, what were his relations with the young lady who had so mysteriously disappeared?

The result of my night's meditation on the affair was a conjecture that flavoured of romance, but seemed no more improbable than many of the events that formed the mystery I was trying to unravel.

It was this:—

Miss Siscombe, who is clandestinely engaged to the tenant of the lonely house, becomes aware of the crime committed by the members of the secret

society, of which her fiancé is one. The latter himself, no doubt confident of her fidelity born of love for him, does not discover that his fellow-members, less sure of the girl's intentions of retaining their guilty secret, have planned her abduction and detention.

He sees her off from Ealing Station after the visit at which she probably made the fateful discovery.

It struck me, I should here say, as curious that the fact of the lady's visit to the house on the hill should have escaped the notice of Mr Yemen. Perhaps, though, I thought, she was one of the two veiled ladies whom I had proved to be others than Mrs Spenser and Carline, though the last-mentioned ladies were, I believed, nevertheless connected with the affair.

During her journey towards London, or, at any rate, before she could reach home, Miss Siscombe is captured, and carried off to the house of the man I conjectured to be the principal of the society.

How the abduction was carried out in the afternoon, and in London, I did not venture to imagine. But such things have happened before now.

This theory appeared to me to cover all the facts of the case, and I carefully noted the chief points of it in my pocket-book before lying down for a few hours' well-earned, or, at any rate, very welcome rest.

Little did I forecast at the time how near the truth my theory would prove to be. Nevertheless, theory or none, I was in a veritable maze of mystery, a tangle of secrets that it seemed impossible to brush away.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CLUE OF THE NEWSPAPER

THOUGH the discovery of the identity of the imprisoned female was distinctly one point towards the solution of the great mystery, I confess to having felt on awaking next morning that I was little nearer the end. I summed up my position thus:—

If I wished to continue my investigation from the time of the abduction of Miss Siscombe, I should find my path beset with countless difficulties. In the first place, I had not the slightest idea of the district in which the young lady was held in restraint, and accordingly was no more in a position to obtain any information from her or her gaoler than I had ever been. Excepting these two there were others from whom it might have been possible to learn important facts in connection with the case. Rodney could, under pressure, have revealed the whole mystery to me, I felt sure, but my partner was gone, and I had no idea of the direction he had taken when evading the grip of the law, which he feared would ere long be upon his collar. Carline might likewise clear up much that was mysterious, but

I have already explained why I dared not interrogate my unhappy fiancée. The two veiled ladies who seemed so intimately connected with the tragedy were impossible, because I knew as little about them, their identity, and place of residence, as I did of the mysterious "S." Negrett, of Scotland Yard, appeared to know something of which I was entirely ignorant, but I had as little hope of pumping him as I had of learning anything from reticent and distant Mrs Spenser or her solicitor. Mr Nicholas Yemen had confided in me as much as he knew (the information supplied to the newspapers being no doubt acquired after my departure from his house), and at present I had no news of the man we had released from his silent companion's unwilling embrace in the house on the Ealing hill-top. If the victim of the tragedy was not the tenant of that house, I was in no more hopeful position than when I had believed him to be such. In fact, the state of affairs was more complicated since we had now to discover the identity of the victim who, according to Mr Negrett's suggestion, had met his death by drowning.

Thus it will be seen that in making the discovery that implicated Miss Jessamine Siscombe I had, so to speak, struck a blind alley, a cul-de-sac, and accordingly I was compelled to retrace my steps and commence from another point my involved and unofficial investigation.

There were one or two things to be done at once, I perceived, and these I did not leave undone.

I first called at Rodney's flat in Victoria Street to ascertain whether he had indeed departed, and learned

from the porter there that my late partner had left home with a small portmanteau on the previous afternoon, stating his intention of taking a few days' holiday. There was apparently nothing further to be learned in this direction, so I turned my steps towards Whitehall, and paid another visit to Mr Wallace Negrett.

The detective was disengaged, and alone, when I was ushered into his presence, and he looked up suddenly and nervously on my arrival. He presented the appearance of having had a bad night, and I inwardly decided that he had been worrying over a case. Was it, though, that which interested me? If so, my suspicions that he knew and cared more than he endeavoured to make out to me were not without foundation. I felt that if I could only read the thoughts of the young dandy, whose brains were not such as his appearance suggested, I should not be groping in the dark as I was at present.

"Any news?" I asked, after the preliminary formalities were over.

"Let me see," he murmured, with that affected manner intended to impress his auditor that led me to doubt his common sense in thus despising the possible intellectual capabilities of that auditor, "let me see. The case of the dead man discovered at Ealing, isn't it?" he drawled, though I knew he was perfectly aware that I was his companion of yesterday.

"Have you found the cabman who drove us down to the house on the hill?" I asked, disregarding his superfluous question.

"Yes, Mr—er—Merton," was the reply. "I had the fellow in here and began to slang him for leaving

us in the lurch. However, he explained that he believed the hatless person who jumped into his cab on emerging from the house was either you or me, and knowing that, since we were, as he imagined, connected with the police, our business would be urgent, he at once complied with our friend the captive's request to drive back like the devil!"

"And how far did he drive him?" I asked with an expression of interest that seemed to trouble my companion.

"Don't forget," said Negrett, with irritating slowness of speech, "that we are not going to mention the fact of our visit to Ealing yesterday. The case is a vulgar one that the local police are quite capable of dealing with, and there is no necessity to make a sensation of it by publishing the additional details of which we are cognisant. They neither greatly concern the affair nor need be divulged even if they did, since no serious crime has been committed, and therefore—"

"Since when has the Law concluded," I interrupted, "that murder is not a serious crime? I fear," I added, with an attempt at sarcasm, "that I am quite behind the times and old-fashioned if indeed the shedding of human blood is a misdemeanour to be overlooked by the police."

"You have asked me two questions, Mr Merton, and I can do no more than give you two answers, after which I need not detain you any longer. In the first place the cab in which we drove to Ealing yesterday returned with its bare-headed occupant to town, and on reaching the Marble Arch the driver

was instructed to stop at the first hat shop. He did so at one in Oxford Street, and his 'fare' alighted so quickly that even then the driver did not discover his mistake. The 'fare' purchased a brown 'pot-hat,' and, returning to the cab equally quickly, purchased a paper from a street lad before re-directing the cabby."

"And the name of the paper—" I interrupted, to the detective's surprise.

"Since you are so particular as to details," he remarked drily, "I may as well mention that it was the *Journal*."

I strove to disguise my elation. The *Journal* is by no means a paper with a large circulation, and the fact that our released prisoner purchased a copy suggested, though of course it did not prove, that he was yet another member of the Secret Society I believed to be responsible for the tragedy of the lonely house.

CHAPTER XXIII

MR NEGRETT'S FIRST SUCCESS

"AFTER purchasing the newspaper," continued Mr Negrett, "our friend ordered the driver to proceed to Baker Street Station. He did so, and his 'fare' alighted, handed him three half-crowns, and entered the station—the one in which is the departure platform for the country. Not until then did it strike the cabman that our friend seemed like neither yourself nor me. However, he took no steps to find out what one would think must have been a mystery to him. This is hardly to be wondered at, for the man appeared a particularly dull specimen of a generally smart class of men. So much for the cabby. Now to relieve myself of the charge you bring against me of taking no steps to solve the affair you brought under our notice. This will be easiest done by my sketching for you the report of the Ealing police on the matter.

"In the first place, the corpse found in the house was that of a man who had been drowned some days before.

"Secondly, the blows that disfigured his face and

body were inflicted for some unknown purpose after death. This is the only crime that has been committed at Ealing.

"Next, the said corpse was stolen from the Crowley Park Mortuary and delivered at the house in which you found it by Parker, Caterson & Co., the carriers, into whose charge it was given by two men, strangers, who brought it in a large packing case, supposed to contain chemicals, on a wheelbarrow to the grocery stores which form the agency of Messrs Parker, Caterson & Co. for the Crowley Park district.

"In the packing-case the body was received by the unknown tenant of the house on the hill and carried upstairs by the latter, assisted by the carter. It arrived on the day previous to our visit, that is on the morning of the day on which you were taken to Ealing by the stranger who hails from Aubrey Square, and whom I have been as yet unable to trace to any particular house in that very respectable district.

"The local police have, with surprising celerity, made these discoveries, and it will be quite safe to leave the matter in their hands under the circumstances. They will have, if they wish to clear up the mystery, to ascertain why the corpse was stolen from the mortuary, why it was disfigured, how the vanished tenant can account for these happenings in connection with his house, and, first of all, what has become of the gentleman in question."

"A nice little job," I muttered, "infinitely easier than . . . But do you mean to tell me that these things have happened in reality? The incidents are

to my mind so remarkable that I cannot help wondering whether you are not trying to lead me astray."

"Think what you like," replied Negrett coldly, "but if you get this evening's papers you will find that all I have told you is so. One fortunate thing for you is that there will now be no inquest at which your presence would be required. Coroner's juries have sometimes a little trick of not accepting a man's word without proof—even if he be a witness."

"What do you mean?" I asked angrily.

"That your word alone might not satisfy a hard-headed set of shopkeepers when your evidence is so startling. Don't forget, Mr Merton, that you cannot *prove* that you visited the Ealing house the night before last, and that what transpired was as you say. Of course, I understand fully that your word is to be relied upon, but—"

"Then you mean to suggest that a jury would doubt my word, that I might be accused of disfiguring the poor stolen corpse, and of complicity in the matter. I am right when I infer that such are your opinions?"

"Gently, gently, Mr Merton," answered Negrett, "I merely mention this to prove to you that I have done you a service in acting as I have. Of course I am fully aware of the irreproachable character you bear, but juries sometimes are over-suspicious, and their verdicts are not infallible. In return for this little favour I will ask you once again to leave the matter in the hands of the Ealing police, who are fully capable of dealing with a case that appears more complicated than it really is. If so, I will do

likewise. My reason for making so remarkable a request is that I do not wish to allow the affair to become a public sensation. There is nothing Scotland Yard dislikes more than the publicity given by the Press to sensational cases, though good results occasionally follow such publicity. Let us then settle this matter now and go about our respective businesses —eh?"

But I did not like the suggestion. Still in the dark as to the detective's motives for making me such a request — the one he had given me was absurdly insufficient to account for his behaviour— still undecided as to whether what he knew was unknown to me, I nevertheless was aware that a sore point with him, for some reason unknown, was the mention in this connection of the Farloe forgeries, which by chance I had referred to on the occasion of my last interview. It was really, therefore, a kind of last resource stroke that I dealt, when, before leaving him, I turned on Mr Negrett and indifferently addressed him thus:

"My friend, you are trying to frighten me into complying with your most irregular request—one, by the way, that I doubt if you would like me to mention to the head officials here. You have already begged me several times, without giving satisfactory reasons for my doing so, to throw up the case. I ask you why this is—what you are aiming at—what your little game may be." I paused for a moment to emphasise my next remark, then asked, in almost a whisper, "Is it anything to do with the Farloe Forgeries?"

And the effect of my words was so startling that I almost regretted having sprung them upon him, so to speak, without warning. His eyes started out of his head as he drew suddenly closer to me. His face grew ashy pale, then a red moist flush rose to his brow, his hands shook, and his voice quavered as he gasped :—

“Good Lord, Merton, what do you mean?”

CHAPTER XXIV

MR YEMEN'S LADY VISITOR

I CANNOT recollect whether I had any particular reason for paying a flying visit to the scene of what I could no longer call the crime (though crime there had been without a doubt), after leaving Mr Negrett suffering under great emotion in his room at New Scotland Yard. At any rate I decided to employ the afternoon in "running down" to Ealing, as those having suburban acquaintances are fond of saying.

I had failed to do anything more than seriously frighten Mr Negrett, but I now realised that there was, to again drop into the vernacular, more in the Scotland Yard detective's behaviour than met the eye—that there was method in what almost amounted to his madness—that, in brief, the affair that was troubling him and me was some mysterious connection or outcome of the Farloe Forgeries case, which had resulted, a couple of years earlier, in the conviction of one, Barnard Venwall, of forging the name of Sir Alfred Farloe on certain documents of vital importance. Condemned on the evidence of handwriting experts, the police, and his cousin, Cavendish Venwall, Barnard had been sentenced to a long

term of imprisonment, and was even now undergoing the punishment which it was publicly considered he thoroughly deserved. The case, as has been said, was one in which Wallace Negrett achieved considerable renown by tracing the forgeries to Barnard Venwall, obtaining evidence of great importance to the prosecution, and in other ways assisting the ends of justice.

Exactly what was the connection between the one case of forgery and the other of—well, I hardly know what to call it—I could not imagine, but from the detective's attitude I felt sure that the affairs were more than closely connected.

Negrett had been unable to explain his emotion to my satisfaction. He had merely informed me that my question had been so absurd an one that for the moment its ridiculous suggestion had taken his breath away. The explanation was one calculated to make me keep a sharp eye on the movements of my friend at the Yard.

The case had now come to assume a different aspect, and my prevailing feeling was one of relief. There had been no murder. Thank heaven for that, since my Carline was concerned. There was, however, a society in existence some of the members of which seemed as unscrupulous as they were cunning. A dead body—that, I gathered, of a suicide who had drowned himself in the Crowley Park Canal—had been stolen, and, for a mysterious purpose, packed off to the house in which it was eventually discovered by me. An apparently harmless, quiet girl had been kidnapped, for an equally unknown reason, and was

even at the moment held in restraint—where I knew not. The corpse had been mutilated with an evident want of motive that demanded the punishment of the perpetrator of so disgraceful an outrage. Consequently, the fact that Carline—my gentle, loving little Carline—was in any way connected with a society that thus feared not God nor regarded man, though it did not affect me as much as had the dread that my fiancée was one of a gang of murderers, prevented me from giving her the opportunity of clearing herself, as I feared she could never do to my satisfaction, by paying a visit to the house in Aubrey Square.

One idea had occurred to me during my walk from Scotland Yard to Charing Cross Station, whence I intended to take train to Praed Street for Paddington. This was that since my entirely respectable partner and, as I feared, my beloved fiancée were both concerned in the business, there was no reason why Wallace Negrett himself should not be a member of the society! Mature consideration, however, led me to decide that the detective could not have had any hand in the affair, since he had demonstrated a genuine interest in the discovery in the lonely house until he had, for a mysterious reason, concluded that the mystery must be hushed up.

The run to Ealing by train is not a long one, and within an hour of leaving Mr Negrett I found myself in the presence of Nicholas Yemen, whose interest in the few sightseers that passed his window on the way to the house where the corpse had been found almost prevented him from supply-

ing me with the further information I sought from the old chatter-box.

"What with the pressmen and a photographer who insisted this was the scene of the outrage, and the noisy people morbidly attracted by the discovery in the house up the road, I hardly know," remarked Mr Yemen, standing in front of the window, "whether I'm in the same house as when you called upon me last time—only yesterday, too," he added, after momentary deliberation.

"I've had a deal to amuse me, too," he went on, "since you left yesterday. In the first place, I was surprised to see the tenant of the house lurking about in dark corners of the road for some time before and after you left—I forgot to mention that fact to you before. I've a head like a sieve, a leaky sieve, sir! Then soon after you went away the police arrived, and one of them told my servant afterwards of the discovery that had been made in the house, and I at once gave the inspector such particulars as I was able to. In the afternoon came a reporter and more policemen, a few busy-bodies (you know bad tidings travel fast, sir), and a crowd of children who wanted to know what a corpse was like. Only one person came here for information, though, excepting the police and the pressmen. That was a young lady half-muffled up, with the sweetest face and the finest eyes I ever saw—and I'm a bit of a judge myself, you know, sir! She wanted to know what had happened at the house on the hill, and when I told her it was a case of murder—so I believed it to be then—I almost thought she would have fainted! By the way, she

was the lady that left some of her belongings behind her. See! Can you imagine a lady dropping her card-case? That's what she did. Nice silver card-case, too. Why, there's a card inside. I never noticed it before. I shall now be able to return it—the case—to its fair owner, with—ahem—a polite note." The old gentleman screwed up his face in pleasant anticipation of the task, as though suffering from a twinge of gout.

"What is the name on the card?" I asked carelessly.

Mr Yemen scanned the piece of pasteboard with one eye shut, then read aloud, to my consternation,

"MISS CARLINE SPENSER,
8 Aubrey Square, W."

CHAPTER XXV

THE HEAT OF THE CHASE

MR YEMEN'S announcement naturally surprised me beyond description. What had Carline been doing down at Ealing? She must have repaired thither immediately after I had taken my leave of her on the previous day. Why had she almost fainted on receiving the information that murder had been committed in the house on the hill-top? If I had entertained any hope up till now that my fiancée was innocent of connection with the affair, that hope seemed to be crushed completely by Mr Yemen's announcement that Carline herself had visited the neighbourhood, and by chance left behind her a trace of the presence in which I could no longer bask as I had done before, believing her to be a queen among women, one free from even social spot and those sins of the world that the law takes no steps towards blotting out.

I hardly remember leaving Mr Yemen's villa. I doubt very much whether I treated the old gentleman with proper politeness. At any rate I tore the silver card-case from his hand, explaining that its owner was a friend of mine to whom I would

return it. I took that and the card that had been hidden inside, and a few minutes later I was outside in the open air, with an inexplicable feeling of general discomfort, but worse of all, an aching of the heart that engendered an overpowering sense of my own loneliness, and a realisation that life no longer seemed to present any attractions but what in my case a sorely-needed meal could supply—a meal that, much as I needed it and efficiently as it was provided at the “Three Feathers” Hotel near the station, I was unable to partake of for very sickness at heart.

But as I sat dallying with napkin, knife and fork, there occurred to me a sudden and startling idea, which made me forget my troubles in the contemplation of a possible solution of the mystery.

I had been quite unable up to the moment to learn anything about that member of the society known as “S.” beyond the mere facts that he had visited Ealing as a vengeance-seeking member of the society, and had left his handkerchief in the lonely house as a poor clue to his identity. Now, I asked myself, was this “S.” the creature whom Negrett and I had released from the deadly embrace of the stolen corpse? Concerning this latter I knew just as little as I did of the “S.” that had been despatched to the house on the hill.

This suggestion was more than a mere hazard, a passing idea. It became a certainty when I recalled how Mr Nicholas Yemen had stated that no one had repaired to the lonely villa on the day of my first visit except those two ever-mysterious veiled ladies

and the young man who had been fastened by some person or persons unknown—doubtless the tenant of the house—to a custodian never vigilant yet ever relentless.

The scene I conjured up was this—that, instead of “S.” being responsible for the murder of the unknown tenant, the latter had in an encounter, the origin of which was as yet unaccountable, overcome and drugged the messenger of the secret society and fastened him to the corpse of the stolen suicide, the presence of which in the house I had also yet to account for.

Now I seemed to have found something to work upon, a firm basis for my investigations. According to Negrett and primarily the cabman who had carried us to Ealing on the previous morning, “S.” presuming him to be this individual, had, after escaping from us (the reason for this action was now plain) been driven eventually to Baker Street.

Whither was he bound? Where would any man repair after undergoing such gruesome experiences, and, being, as he thought, in danger? Why, presumably to his home! But in this case, when he had been sent as a representative of the society of which he was a member to Ealing on business of such vital importance, was it not more than likely that he would, before doing anything else, hasten to render an account of his experiences—of the non-success of his errand? If so—and my argument seemed sound—I decided that the place to which he would at once proceed would be the residence of the

principal or chief of the society, who had stated (through the telephone) that he had sent "S." down to Ealing, and in whose house was imprisoned, according to my deductions, Miss Jessamine Siscombe, fiancée of the tenant of the lonely house. So far, so good.

Now it will be remembered that Mr Negrett had further informed me of the Ealing police's discovery, that the disfigured corpse found in the hill-top villa had been stolen from the mortuary at a little village town in Hertfordshire, called Crowley Park. The inference to be drawn from this was that some one connected either with the society or with the tenant of the Ealing villa had visited Crowley Park for the purpose of the theft. Since such a little-known place as Crowley Park would hardly be selected on account of its facilities for body-snatching, a further inference was that in the little country town would be found the home of some one deeply concerned in the affair—the some one (or there would probably be two persons at least) who had despatched the stolen body to the tenant of the lonely house on the hill, where it had been so shamefully battered and mutilated.

Crowley Park Station was on the Baker Street line. "S." had returned from Ealing on his way, I believed, to the headquarters of the society, to Baker Street. Was I not therefore justified in suspecting that the house from which the chief of the society had spoken by telephone to one of his brother-members was to be found at Crowley Park?

Without doubt my next move must be towards the little Hertfordshire town, where, with luck, I might chance upon the root of the mystery, the prison-house of Miss Siscombe, and—the solution of Carline's secret.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE VILLAGE INN

RECOGNISING that Crowley Park, though so near the great metropolis, was, nevertheless, decidedly rural and behind the times, I took the opportunity —allowed me by the period I had to wait on reaching Baker Street Station before the next train that would carry me to my destination—of hunting up a gun-shop in Euston Road, and there investing a small sum in a pocket revolver, that could be conveniently hidden in the breast-pocket, yet was no plaything. It had occurred to me that since it had been possible to steal a corpse from the Crowley Park mortuary, the police arrangements could be hardly up-to-date, and, consequently, that if I got into a tight place during the course of my investigations I should have only myself to rely upon in the hour of danger. It had also been brought back to me yet again that though I had not so far been in any way molested by those who imagined I held their secrets in my hand, it was not improbable that I might run up against some of the members of the society when I reached what I firmly believed was their own hunting-grounds.

I was landed at the dingy little station of Crowley Park at a little after five o'clock in the dull winter's evening. All round me were signs of a quiet, peaceful country district. Could I be mistaken in the step I had taken? Was it possible that the charming little rustic village harboured a band of unscrupulous, mysterious rascals such as "S." and his fellows appeared to be? Yet even had I erred in inferring that the headquarters of the society were situated in the neighbourhood, it was quite plain that underhand influences, incompatible with its peaceful surroundings, had been working in Crowley Park. The body had been stolen from the local mortuary, so much I knew to be actual fact. It seemed to me almost strange that there should be any mortuary in a part of the country as yet free from the ravages of the jerry-builder and the tax-gatherer, and peopled only by honest farmers and villagers, who associated crime only with great cities, and mystery with the bright-coloured novels offered for sale on the book-stall. That a suicide should have occurred in a district where care and worry were not evident on every face, as they seem to be in the rush and roar of London, seemed alone remarkable. Could it be, I wondered, that the presumed suicide was not such at all, that the same underhand influences that worked the kidnapping of the body were responsible for the death of the man I had discovered in the lonely house at Ealing?

It was too late to hope to achieve much that night. I had hurried down from town oblivious of the fact that dusk was almost upon me, and that

after dark I could not expect to do much towards the unravelling of the mystery. Thus I determined that I would spend the three or four hours I had before the last train to town was timed to leave Crowley Park, in reconnoitring the neighbourhood ; so I started from the railway station with the fixed intention of viewing the village and casually conversing with any one with whom I might be brought into contact. How often, I might have thought had I been able to forecast coming events, are the best intentions of impotent man subject to alteration ! Had I known then that I was not to see London again that night, that even a man armed with a new revolver is not all-powerful, that dark deeds of the night are not known only to great cities, I might not have gazed so complacently upon the common-place diurnal actions of those who passed me on their way home from work. The lighting of the street lamps—few and far between—and of those in the cottage windows might not have filled me with a sense of peaceful yet hardly satisfactory assurance that I had come on a wild goose chase. My cheery “good-night” to all those that thus greeted me might have been less hearty, and, perhaps—perhaps I might have drawn back, have retraced my steps to the railway station, and caught the return train that whistled and panted and shunted outside the little terminus. But, as it was, I trod noisily forward, never forgetting, however, to keep a keen eye on the houses and cottages that I passed.

The bright lights of the village inn presently attracted my attention, and in the hope of overhear-

ing some remarks on the theft of the suicide's corpse, I made my way into the public bar, and ordered a pint of the ale that seemed to form the beverage of all the assembled villagers. I was not astonished to find that the recent sensation was the topic of a general conversation in which most of those present joined. While they talked, and I lost nothing of what was said, I scanned the faces of the speakers with a view to ascertaining whether the behaviour or appearance of any of them was such as to raise my suspicion. But they were all honest looking fellows—sons of the soil, for the most part—and I was compelled to reach the decision that they, at any rate, were unconnected with the fathomless mystery that seemed, in a way, to concern the neighbourhood.

"Oi can't compr'end it, Oi can't," observed one old man as I entered. "We ain't no body-stealers in these parts. It's some o' these messing London chaps that has done it—we ain't!"

"O' course not, Joe," answered another, adding mysteriously: "An' if you'll take my word for it, gents, the same scoundrels as stole the body pushed Tim Boll into the canal!" And he rapped the table angrily.

"No, no, mister," exclaimed the fat landlord, gravely; "you know what Tim Boll was—always drunk, 'cept in the morning, and as like to walk straight into the canal as not, him being that bad he couldn't distinguish between it and the road. A tidy, respectable chap, too—who'd want to push him into the canal, eh? No, gents, some doctor went off with 'is body for dissectin' purposes, and

took it to the house where the bobbies found it. Cruel, I call it; but Tim warn't a good man, and what could you expect? He played fast and loose in these quiet parts, and what with wimmen and wine, and forgetting his poor father was only a mill-and, and his poor mother, poor soul, a lass from the work'us, he held 'imself that 'igh with his moustaches and cigars and collars, that I always sez, 'Pride before a fall,' sez I."

And so they discussed the matter at length, while I discussed my drink—slowly, so that I could, without drawing public attention upon me, remain waiting for any news that I might not have heard, though the fact of only a part of the intelligence I had received being known to the villagers, made it doubtful whether I could learn much from their further conversation.

I was on the point of draining my mug before leaving the inn, when the outer door was gently opened, and, observed by hardly any of the speakers, a man entered.

My feelings may be imagined when I recognised him as the person I believed to be known as "S," whom we had rescued on the previous day from the lonely house and the fetters that secured him to the suicide's corpse!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TERROR BY NIGHT

So unexpected a proof of the accuracy of my deductions for the moment held me spellbound. Then my cautious instincts asserted themselves and hurriedly I paid for my ale, and, wishing the landlord "Good-evening," with my back turned to the new-comer, I made for the exit. As luck would have it, someone's leg almost tripped me up as I made a sudden and hasty departure, and turning with a word of apology, I gave "S." a chance of scrutinising my side face. Glancing back at him through the semi-frosted glass door of the inn, I realised that he must have seen me. The expression of recognition and annoyance on his face was unmistakable, and I deeply regretted that I had been so careless as to give him the opportunity of identifying myself with one of the rescuers from whom he had escaped. Under the present circumstances, it behoved me to keep on my guard. That much was quite clear.

A gentle rain was falling when I stepped out into the street, hardly knowing which way to turn, and whither to go. Complete darkness had now fallen, and, if I wished to do so, I knew I should

have no difficulty in hiding myself in the shadows of a neighbouring wall, if I decided to remain unseen, waiting for the return of the unknown "S."

I had already stood, getting slowly drenched to the skin, for some minutes, when I reflected that no good could come of following the man whose entrance had hurried my departure from the inn. Having seen me, and undoubtedly recognised me, it was absurd to imagine that he would conduct me to the house in which I should find Jessamine Siscombe, by returning there, leaving me to follow in the shadows. There was one surer way of ascertaining which house it was in the village that formed the headquarters of the society whose misdoings were puzzling me. That was to learn how many of the residents of Crowley Park were "on the telephone." The principal, or chief, of the society had addressed some fellow-member (to whose identity, by the way, I had no clue), from his own house. If, indeed, he resided in or near the village, as I inferred from the various facts that had reached me, then it would be an easy matter to trace him to his lair, for in a remote village like Crowley Park it was unlikely that many would employ the telephone as a means of communication. Seeing the words, "Telephone Call Office" over the door of a small house down the street, I proceeded to knock up the inmate, and, by judicious cross-questioning and the exchange of a florin, induced a youth in attendance to supply me with the names of all the neighbours who had telephones set up in their houses. There were only half a dozen.

The first name was that of a well-known horticulturist and nursery man, who had gardens in the neighbourhood. The second was that of the local "Stores." Name Number 3 was that of a rich widow who owned the greater part of the county. That of the inn was Number 4. Number 5 was the police station, and the last name was that of "Dr Tregaskis, The Beehive Cottage."

Whereupon I asked to be directed to the doctor's residence, after learning from my informant that Tregaskis was a jovial, well-to-do bachelor, who appeared to entertain a good deal, did not practice, kept two elderly crones for servants, and seldom left his home, which, instead of being a small cottage, as its name suggested, was a monstrous, low-lying bungalow, situated outside the village and on the brink of the canal near where Tim Boll had been drowned!

I considered that I was pretty safe in presuming that Dr Tregaskis and the chief of the secret society were one, and that I was on the verge of a great discovery if I pressed on and did a little "burglarious entry" work on my own account during the next few hours. Once I discovered that Miss Siscombe was indeed held in restraint at The Beehive Cottage, my part of the work would be done. The police would have to complete what I had begun, and I must trust to Providence, and my own further endeavours, that my Carline's name was not brought into the proceedings that would follow.

There were several people about when I passed

through the village on my way towards the "Beehive," but once I had left the cottages behind me, I was struck by a sense of the utter loneliness of the place. What crime might not be perpetrated down there by the inhabitants of the "Beehive Cottage?" The black, seething waters of the canal would conceal all traces! And with my thoughts running thus, I felt in my breast coat pocket, assuring myself that the revolver I had purchased was still there.

Suddenly, as I paused for a moment to ascertain the time from my watch, lighting a match in order to accomplish this, I fancied I heard the sound of a gentle footstep immediately behind me. Proceeding cautiously, now on the alert, I distinctly heard a repetition of the sound. Some one was following me, and doing so with care that I should not become aware of the fact!

It was too dark for me to perceive even the form of my pursuer when I looked round over my shoulder, but my ear told me that I was still being followed when I reached a turn in the road near a stile, which, making a break in the hedge on one side, allowed me to see through. A few hundred yards off stood the great bungalow which had been described to me. From its windows proceeded no light, but the house was shown up in relief by what was evidently a lamp in the street.

Hardly knowing which was the shorter way to the "Beehive Cottage," I moved on past the stile, deeming it best to keep to the road so long as possible. From my after-experiences I gathered that the man

who had been following me, and whom I rightly believed to be "S." took the short cut across the fields. At the time I was unable to ascertain whether I was still followed or no, and made my way cautiously on down the dark road.

Once again did the sound of footsteps in my rear arrest my attention. This time it was the sound of a firm, decisive footfall, that rang out sharp and clear through the slush and the darkness. The footsteps approached me so rapidly that, considering discretion was, at the moment, to be preferred to valour, I crouched down in the dank ditch and waited for the newcomer to pass. When he did so I caught a momentary glimpse of a medium-sized man hurrying forward, and then, shaking the rain-drops from my clothes, I crept out of my hiding-place and silently followed.

Turning another sharp corner, I caught another glimpse of the man who had passed me, as he approached the dim street-lamp that stood opposite the great iron gates of the fir-encircled bungalow.

After momentary hesitation the man approached the gates, and pushed one of them open. By this time I was close behind him, but well hidden in the shadows. He had taken but a couple of steps up the dim drive leading to the doctor's house when a black form leaped out from behind a tree. I heard a muffled exclamation of surprise, then something that glittered for a moment flashed out of the darkness. There followed the dull sound of a heavy blow, and a voice cried out in tones of anguish that seemed to appeal for help to my

inmost heart, as, rising in intensity, it suddenly ceased, while the echo, shrill and awe-inspiring, reverberated in the trees as one of the two forms collapsed upon the moist gravel of the avenue.

But that terrible inarticulate cry did more than fill me with a sense of horror at being witness of so fearful an outrage. It betrayed to me without a shadow of doubt the identity of the man who had passed me in the road, and had now, as I firmly believed, received the fate that was intended by the cowardly rascal "S." for myself!

I had recognised the voice as one I had heard before. Never for a moment did I have to hesitate to recall when and where I had last heard it.

That eerie cry of anguish told me that the victim of this new tragedy was none other than *Mr Wallace Negrett of Scotland Yard!*

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GARDEN OF SHADOWS

FOR a moment my surprise at discovering the man from Scotland Yard bent on evidently the same errand as myself overcame every other feeling, and I stood motionless in the shadows as I watched the dark figure of the man "S." steal cautiously away from his victim's prostrate body, and disappear through the bushes in the direction of the darkened house.

What did it all mean? Was the lurker in the shrubbery waiting for me when he struck out at my fellow-investigator? Was that foul blow intended to repay me for not adhering to the commands that I should forget that which I saw in the house on the Ealing hill-top? Above all, was Wallace Negrett present in the capacity of detective, or could it be—judging by his unhesitating approach to the bungalow—that he was indeed, as I had formerly suggested, one of the gang that occupied the house tenanted by Dr Tregaskis?

Little time was allowed me to wonder thus. Before I had decided to examine the body of Negrett that lay—a black shadow in a mass of grey

ones—within a few yards of me, there fell upon my attentive ear the sound of footsteps approaching through the shrubs. Mingled with it was the indistinct murmur of several voices, and, piercing wierdly the clusters of evergreen, shot the dim, satanic rays of a red lantern, which at length fell directly upon the pale, upturned face of the victim of the recent assault, confirming my impressions as to the identity of the unfortunate man.

The sensation that if you can see others those others must see you impelled me to crouch even closer under the wall, embracing the damp corner-post, lest I should unintentionally move, until the finger-nails that gripped the stone-work were turned back and bent, so rigid was my grasp.

The light drew nearer; the sounds, both of movement and whispered speech, increased; the garden, such as it was, glistened and shone dimly as the lantern flashed out suddenly from behind a tree, and, in the steamy glow that rose from it, I caught a glimpse of a dark, bearded face—that of the tall, burly man who held it. With him walked two others, one short and recognisable at once as “S.” the other of medium height and with a figure that I also seemed to recognise.

Now they were bending over the prostrate detective, the ruby light shining brightly on his pale, clear-cut features. But my eyes were rivetted upon the face of the late assailant, “S.” and I looked, not in vain, for those signs writ thereon that would prove whether or no he had been mistaken as to his victim. His countenance, even in the semi-darkness in which

he stood bending slightly forward, seemed to blanche as he recognised that Negrett was not the man he had seen hastening from the village inn. Though his companions were whispering softly together, he did not join in their muffled conversation. The sight of his victim seemed to fascinate him, and he rubbed his eyes once as though doubtful whether he saw aright. No doubt, however, was there that he identified the man whom he had so cruelly struck down as one of those who had rescued him from the fetters of guilt that held him a captive in the house on the Ealing hill-top. I did not fail to notice that, whatever his game was, he did not confide to his companions that the body lying on the damp drive was not that of the man he had intended to lay low.

I had double reasons for watching with breathless interest the events that followed. Not only was the treatment of Negrett that which, but for a lucky intervention of Providence in my favour, I might have undergone, but, as it was, the victim's personality was one that interested and at the same time greatly puzzled me. The inference I drew from the non-recognition of the unconscious detective, was that my suggestions concerning his relations with Dr Tregaskis and that gentleman's comrades were erroneous.

Pulling himself together, as the saying is, the man "S." proceeded to assist the pseudo-doctor (I gathered he was such from the very unprofessional way in which he examined his "patient" to find out whether or no he lived), and the third person to

raise the body and commence removing all traces of the recent affair.

One taking the detective's shoulders and another his legs, while the "doctor" went ahead with the light, they presently began to move away towards the grim, shadowy bungalow in the distance. And as they turned, the red glow fell upon the face of the third man, and I knew at once why I had seemed to recall having met him before.

He was none other than Alfred Rodney, my fugitive partner!

I have said before now that the series of mysterious circumstances that had gone to make up the great enigma centering round what I had considered the Ealing tragedy, had tended to harden me against surprises, however startling. But I confess that the sight of Rodney in the dark shrubbery of the "doctor's" bungalow at Crowley Park came as something of a shock to me. I had implicitly believed my late partner when he stated in his hurriedly-scribbled note that he had departed for the Continent, because I imagined that he deemed flight advisable under the circumstances. I might, perhaps, had I given the matter a thought, have admitted the possibility of Rodney repairing to the headquarters of the mysterious society which numbered him among its members. And now the sight of the man whom I had trusted, though perhaps never greatly liked, assisting such a scoundrel as "S." to remove the traces of what was in all probability a disgraceful crime held me spell-bound.

The bushes had closed together again after the passage of the little party with their strange burden. Darkness took the place of the dim light of the lantern, and I ventured to creep noiselessly out of my hiding-place, and follow in the direction taken by the nocturnal evil-doers. Nor, as I did so, did I fail to realise how dangerous would my position be if I were discovered by the occupants of the bungalow, in the grounds of which I was trespassing.

My heart beat loudly as the shrubs seemed to crackle unusually noisily under the gentle pressure of my body. Slowly I wormed my way between them in pursuit of the light which sped on ahead of me at a rate that should have convinced me of my security from detection, provided I kept so safe a distance from my quarry.

Twigs and splinters from the trees, that should have been soaked by the rain, seemed to snap with the report of dry wood, but the light was never directed towards me, and I continued to follow the three ghostly forms without apparently being suspected. Yet I knew that "S." must have perceived that I was not far off, unless, perhaps, he decided that he had been following Negrett, and not me, from the village.

And as I walked my hand sought the metal object that bulged in my breast-coat pocket—but I knew that only as a final resource must I use. The probabilities were that the trio were well armed, and I could not forget that I was but one man against three—and those three, villains!

CHAPTER XXIX

SILENT WATCHERS

THE garden in which the bungalow stood was a large one, and I soon perceived that my leaders were not making for the house, but hastening towards a more distant part of the grounds.

Once through the bushes, and in an open and exposed lawn, it became necessary for me to proceed even more cautiously than before. A thin, slanting drizzle that beat upon my face did not assist my ends, for not only did it become more difficult for me to keep the light in sight, but I should be unable to perceive the fact were the three companions ahead to turn in my direction.

Presently I became aware that the light had suddenly stopped in its progress, and simultaneously the dull swish-wash of water made itself audible to me. We were near some stream, it seemed. I instantly recollect that mention had been made by one of the villagers at the inn of a certain canal near where the supposed suicide, whose body had been stolen from the local mortuary, had been last seen. I shuddered as I saw in anticipation the fate of unhappy Wallace Negrett, if he were not already dead. They were

going to commit his body—weighted, no doubt—to the safe keeping of the dull waters that crept down the canal which bounded the bungalow's garden!

Ever cautious, I made my way nearer and nearer to that little gang lighted up in a weird tint, half-red, half-green. The men seemed to be holding a council of war there on the brink of the water, and in the shadows cast by a couple of bare, giant trees. They had laid their burden upon the soppy ground, and with monstrous callousness and audacity one of them was lighting a cigarette by thrusting the end of it into one of the vent-holes of the lantern.

And as I stood—not twenty yards from them—I shivered with the cold. But it was not the cold that sent a more emphatic shudder down my back a moment later, when, without warning, I suddenly felt the clutch of a hand on my shoulder!

For a moment I dared not look round. My surroundings were so weird, so uncommon, my errand so remarkable, and the incidents of the evening so terrible that I confess I feared to turn and confront a something—something outrageous and inhuman—something that one might, with a small stretch of imagination, conjure up as existing in the wild grounds of the mysterious bungalow or the waters that bounded it.

But when at length I did turn, all my fears vanished. It was not even one of the members of the society that stood before me, trembling like the aspen-leaf of tradition. It was a woman!

She was in a light dress that looked eerily out of place, standing out bold and severe against the black background. I could not see her features—it was too

dark to do so—but her figure was that of a girl, and one that might be very beautiful, I could not help thinking.

She stood as I did for some moments—motionless, trembling, puzzled. And I saw that though she failed to understand my presence in the garden, I was not entirely the object of her interest. She was looking beyond me, through the shadows and the darkness, at those three forms, ever and anon silhouetted against a background of bushes, and lighted up in changing tints of red from the flickering lantern.

But she knew that I, at any rate, was not one of them—one of the society that had its headquarters in the low, rambling bungalow to our right—for she did not draw back her hand but, rather, clutched the tighter to my arm, as though in me she recognised a possible defender, if it came to the pinch.

To me it seemed that she was in the abandon of despair. Though I could not understand how she came to be there in the garden of shadows, it was quite plain that she was suffering from a fear that appeared to be the result of her treatment by the men in front of us, for I heard her mutter such terrible imprecations against them—such as I had never heard nor hope to hear again from female lips—that I knew she must have some great reason for the loathing she appeared to display towards them. Perhaps, I thought, she had seen what I had, or something equally shocking.

She appeared, though, to be fascinated, as I was, by the spectacle before us, for minutes had passed before she whispered into my ear: “Who are you?

What are you doing here?" The emphasis she laid upon the last word told me plainly what she thought of her surroundings. It seemed as though she considered the bungalow and its grounds a place fit for no respectable person to be in. I remember wondering whether she were sane. Perhaps it was her similarity in outline to the "Woman in White" that led me to consider the possibility of my being in the company of a lunatic. Strange things, it seemed, stranger than I had anticipated—and that is saying a great deal—were the order in this place, so near to the centre of civilisation, and yet so deep in the pure, peaceful country.

Before I had time to answer her more than to whisper that I intended no harm, a sound of movement among the men on the bank of the canal drew my attention thither from my companion.

The "doctor" and his fellows had risen quietly, and I knew, by the fact that the light of the lantern had been either covered or extinguished, I must expect some move on their part. In the pitch darkness I could see nothing. I wondered whether they were even now committing the body of unhappy Negrett to the keeping of the cold waters, and listened attentively for the sound of a splash. But none came, though I fancied I detected a murmur of movement up the canal, and presently a thud, as of a heavy body falling upon some hard surface! Then seemed to follow the noise as of a throbbing machine, and a weird light made itself seen from the depths beyond where the three men stood. But because it was so dark that if I moved

I might run against one of those three, and risk not only my own life, but that of my fair companion, I did not leave the shelter of the whispering trees, and could only guess that the work of the criminals had been accomplished, and that, for some incomprehensible reason, they had dropped the detective's body, unperceived, into a passing steam barge, and not into the depths of the canal!

And before I could ponder upon the startling episode, I suddenly realised that she who stood trembling beside me must be the one whom I had come to seek. Without a doubt my companion must be Miss Jessamine Siscombe, who had been kidnapped by the society after parting from the tenant of the house at Ealing !

CHAPTER XXX

BIRDS OF THE NIGHT

THE red light of the lantern, re-kindled or unshaded, had once again been flashed around by the pseudo-doctor, and in single file, creeping cautiously and without their burden, the three men had passed us—almost within touching distance—on their way towards the house. And now I felt in a quandary. Should I hasten down to the canal and ascertain whether or no Negrett's body had been cast upon a passing barge? Or should I follow the three night-birds and, if possible, reconnoitre their headquarters? Yet again, was it not my duty to first of all discover whether Miss Siscombe—if she were, indeed, my companion—required my assistance in what was, judging by the absence of out-door clothing, her unpleasant predicament? In any event, prompt action was necessary, for in the one case the barge would quickly pass beyond my reach; in the second, if the "doctor" and his fellow-members reached the bungalow and entered I should be unable to follow suit; while, in the third case, the disappearance of Miss Siscombe would certainly be discovered

ere long, since she appeared not to have retired for the night and possibly had been in the unpleasant company of the "doctor" and Rodney when the two latter were called out to conceal all traces of the crime committed by the third man, "S."

Deliberation occupied considerably less time than it takes to set down these words, and almost before the red light had disappeared behind the bushes that fringed the lawn I had decided upon my course of action.

Turning to my silent and ever trembling companion, I asked her whether she was indeed Miss Siscombe, and on hearing that my inference was correct, informed her that she alone—and her abduction by Tregaskis and his men—was the cause of my presence there in the garden of shadows. I could see that she failed to quite understand the story I hurriedly sketched to her, but my assurance that I was a detective, and would not leave her until she reached a place of safety calmed her troubled mind.

Hurriedly I put a few questions to her as regards the inmates of the bungalow, and in the course of her replies—incoherent and involved as they nevertheless were—I gathered that the three men who had passed us were, with the exception of the servants, the sole occupants of the house.

Realising that, unless I broke my promise to the girl and deserted her, I must leave everything else until I had escorted her to the village, or, at any rate, placed her in the safe keeping of some one who

would be better able to soothe her than myself, I suggested that we should make a move, and prepared for doing so by placing the macintosh cape I had been wearing over Miss Siscombe's thinly-covered shoulders. Then silently, and with the utmost caution, we made our way through the garden, out of the gate, and into the deserted and rain-drenched road.

To me the pathway to the village seemed interminable. The dark was so great that only by exercising the utmost care could we keep to the beaten track. My companion started at every night-whisper that disturbed the grim silence, and towards the end of our journey showed unmistakable signs of fatigue. At every few steps she stopped, turned, and listened for the sounds of pursuing footsteps that I, too, expected every minute to hear.

For myself, my heart was alternately light and heavy. I felt that the fate of the man from Scotland Yard lay more or less at my door. Had I boldly kept ahead of him when on my way to the bungalow, he would never have come to hurt. Moreover, the fact that he had learned of the hiding-place of the Tregaskis and the others—the headquarters of the mysterious gang of evildoers—suggested that he had made considerable headway, and, with perhaps unpardonably mercenary feelings, I regretted his removal prevented me from learning what I should have doubtless been able to elicit from him.

On the other hand, I expected to extract much

information bearing upon the case from Miss Siscombe. Then, too, if I placed the police in possession of what I already knew of the goings-on at the Beehive Cottage, the inevitable arrests would follow, the mystery be sifted, and ultimately solved, and my self-set task accomplished.

But my heart groaned again when I recollect ed that the hardest of my duties would be to shield my Carline from suspicion, unless, unless indeed—but the hope of such an event had long been extinguished—she was able to satisfactorily explain her behaviour which had puzzled me so much.

As I have said, the journey to the village seemed a very long one, but at length it came to an end, and with a sigh of relief, I found myself at the door of the inn—not yet closed for the night—with Miss Siscombe leaning heavily upon me, but equally thankful as myself that pursuit was no longer to be feared. Yet I wondered to myself whether the three desperadoes of the bungalow would meekly permit their captive to be carried off under their very noses, so to speak. At any rate, to make sure of my companion's safety, I determined to keep on my guard throughout the night watches, lest by hook or by crook, by daring outrage or by cunning ruse, my witness—for such I considered her—should be once again stolen by the scoundrels for an, as yet, unknown purpose.

The landlady of the inn was a homely matron of the old order of landladies that is so rapidly giving place to a new and less picturesque and honest class. Into her charge I committed the girl,

requesting her to spare no pains in making Miss Siscombe comfortable. Then I refreshed myself, after my remarkable experiences, in the almost deserted bar before sallying out to communicate with the local police. From them I, however, quite expected to receive an exhibition of red-tapeism that would very probably allow our birds time to fly, once they had discovered Miss Siscombe's absence, and, possibly, my footprints in the garden.

First ascertaining from the barman where the police-sergeant was to be found, I turned up the collar of the cape that my late companion had returned to me with a sincere expression of thanks, flung back the door, and stepped once more out into the rain.

Instantly my notice was drawn to the approaching form of a man, who appeared either to be suffering from some severe indisposition, or was in an advanced state of intoxication. I should not have given him a second glance had I not perceived that a thin stream of liquid drained softly from the points of his overcoat. The stream was of rain water, but the light from the windows of the inn revealed the fact that the water was tinted with another stream, of scarlet, that trickled darkly down his clothes.

I scanned the staggering man's face, and for the moment was struck dumb with surprise when I saw that before me stood, staring blankly at me, as I was at him, *Wallace Negrett, whom I believed to be dead!*

CHAPTER XXXI

ON GUARD

THE sun had risen, and the early birds of the mild winter were serenading the village when I rose from the ottoman in the inn parlour, which I had persisted in choosing for my bed. I had not slept much—but the hard nature of the couch was not responsible for this. It was because I had two persons in my charge who, together, should be able to solve my mystery. From neither had I extracted a word—nor tried to in the case of Miss Siscombe—with reference to the case, and excitement, as well as what was, perhaps, over-caution, drove sleep from my hard, embroidered pillow.

With my own hands I had put my rival Negrett to bed in the second-best room of which the inn could boast, and but little had I learned from him to account for his presence in the neighbourhood in the first instance, or his escape in the second. He merely told me that an attempt had been made on his life, little dreaming that I knew more about it than even he did. Exhausted by the loss of blood from a slight wound in the chest,

the flow of which I succeeded in staunching without medical assistance, the Scotland Yard man had been too weak and overcome by his experiences even to speak articulately, and I had, when I saw his eyes close in sleep, mounted guard downstairs over the pair, first dispatching the barman to fetch the police sergeant from his bed.

The official in question appeared in due course in scanty attire and a bad temper, which was naturally what I expected, despite the high opinion I had expressed to Negrett of the suburban and county police whom he so greatly despised.

The story I told the officer was brief, but to the point. Negrett and I, detectives, the former from the "Yard," had come down in pursuit of certain criminals, whom we had traced to "Beehive Cottage." We had fallen in with the said criminals, and Negrett had been injured in the consequent skirmish. We had, after the manner of Adelphi heroes, succeeded in rescuing a charming young lady from the clutches of the rascals, and all that remained to be done was to apprehend the criminals. Had we a warrant? I was about to reply in the negative, but suddenly recollecting that my injured companion might have had the forethought to obtain one before setting out to Crowley Park. Well—this from the sergeant—nothing could be done except a watch placed upon the suspects until the warrant was produced, when the local police force would be at our disposal. This was also as much as I had expected, and, loth as I was to waste so much valuable time, but determined not to awake

Negrett in his present state, I requested the officer to call back in the morning, and dismissed him with instructions to visit the barman at my expense on his way out. He undertook to "have an eye kept" on the bungalow throughout the night, and promised to appear in the morning as early as was possible for so hard-worked a man.

I had been cruel enough to wake Negrett and question him with regard to the warrant before the officer returned in the morning.

My patient had almost recovered from the effect of his assault, and at once endeavoured to rise and dress. But, though his intentions were good, his body did not respond to his endeavours to leap out of bed, and I gently placed him back on the old-fashioned four-poster that had formed his resting-place.

To my delight—at which he seemed surprised—he informed me, with a candour that seemed surprising from one who had appeared so reticent, that he had indeed obtained a warrant to search the house known as "Beehive Cottage," but not one for the arrest of the occupants, against whom no offence could be proved unless any of them were recognised as the persons who despatched the box containing the stolen body of Timothy Boll, or unless Miss Siscombe was found to be detained on the premises. However, a search-warrant had been taken out, and this Negrett produced from a hidden pocket in his overcoat.

But he refused to hand it over to me, and again vainly attempted to raise himself, in order to

converse the easier. Moreover, he desired—and I could see he was puzzled on the point—to learn how much I knew of his movements, and whether I had discovered by the same series of deductions as he, the locality of the headquarters of the gang responsible for the various mysterious episodes in connection with the hill-top house at Ealing.

Without supplying him with any of the information for which he craved, I put the question to him deliberately—Did he want the occupants of “Beehive Cottage” to escape scot-free? And, strange to say, he took some minutes to reply.

I could see that he was still acting under some influence of which I was unaware. I knew well now that he could not be a member of the Society of which Tregaskis was apparently the leading spirit. Yet his behaviour suggested he had reasons for delaying the course of justice. I anticipated some startling information when once I got him to talk. I was not to be disappointed—either by him or by my other charge, Miss Jessamine Siscombe, the kidnapped fiancée of the tenant of the lonely house.

Still unable to obtain the warrant, and leaving Negrett to reflect further upon the subject which seemed to puzzle him, I hastened downstairs on learning that the policeman awaited me, and eagerly begged for any news that worthy might have.

More enterprising than I should have expected, the man had himself watched—from a safe distance—the house of Dr Tregaskis, and, so far, nothing

calculated to raise suspicion had transpired, either in the house or grounds. Apparently, therefore, the flight of Miss Siscombe had not been discovered on the previous night. However, within an hour or two the "doctor" must surely learn that his prisoner is no longer such, and then—? I sent the policeman back to mount guard again outside the bungalow—by half a sovereign better off than he was before.

On his departure—again refreshed at the bar—I returned to Negrett's room, and finding that he had managed to gain his feet, helped him to dress, though I considered it extremely foolhardy for him to leave his bed. Next I half-carried, half-led him downstairs into the sitting-room I had retained, and here we were shortly afterwards joined by Miss Siscombe, whom I had not as yet seen in daylight, and, consequently, failed to recognise at first. Having introduced her to Negrett, the three of us sat down to breakfast, and when the maid withdrew I called upon the young lady to briefly sketch her experiences since leaving home on the previous Tuesday.

Without hesitation Miss Siscombe complied, and her story was something as follows:—

CHAPTER XXXII

THE STORY OF THE KIDNAPPED LADY

"IT is not a long story, Mr Merton," she began, "but one that I could not tell if I were at all self-conscious.

"As you appear to know, I left my mother's house in Malmesbury Terrace, Regent's Park, last Tuesday afternoon, took the train from Baker Street to Ealing Broadway, and alighted there, being met (according to appointment) by a gentleman with whom I had become acquainted once or twice out in society, and between myself and whom a strong attachment had sprung up."

I ventured to remark at this point that I understood Mrs Siscombe was unaware of the attachment, whereupon our companion explained thus:—

"My mother is, unfortunately, an invalid, and easily worried. Consequently, I seldom tell her much but what actually concerns her. I never mentioned to her my acquaintance with the gentleman I met at Ealing, and now, of course, deeply regret that I deceived her by announcing, when I left home, my intention of merely taking a walk.

"Mr Gerald Fitzgerald, the gentleman to whom

I have referred, met me, as I have said, at Ealing, and we occupied the afternoon by making an excursion to a well-known church in the neighbourhood, taking tea at a confectioner's in the town on our return. Mr FitzGerald, who lives at Ealing—though I have never, I think, learned his exact address—saw me off in a first-class carriage from Broadway Station, and I effected the journey safely, unaware of the fact that two or three men, whom I had noticed in my vicinity several times during the day, must also have been in the train, which reached Paddington towards dusk. Feeling that my mother would worry if she learned that I had not returned from my 'walk,' I was hurrying through the empty subway leading into Praed Street Station, when a man dashed down the steps behind, passed me quickly, then, turning, caught me by the throat, and pressed a handkerchief saturated with some powerfully-scented liquid over my mouth and nose. It seemed ages before, struggling for my life, I lost consciousness. Consequently, it was not until later that I learned how my assailant—known to you as the 'doctor'—and his companions, representing themselves as unknown to one another, explained to the crowd that presently collected round my prostrate form, how I had tripped and fallen, knocking my head against the tiled floor with a severity that had deprived me of consciousness.

"Explaining that he was a doctor, my assailant had me lifted into a cab, and the other men, following in hansoms at some distance, to avoid any

suspicion being raised, we made ostensibly for the nearest hospital ; but the driver being subsequently (and erroneously !) informed that I had recovered somewhat, was directed to drive to Willesden, where I, supported by the ‘doctor,’ alighted, and another cab being requisitioned, Harrow was reached. Here another change of cabs was made, and at last we reached a village — the name of which I never learned—where the last vehicle was discharged, and I was practically carried—still semi-conscious at the best—to the ‘Bungalow,’ where I have been detained a prisoner in one room, with two old hags of servants as custodians, until I managed to clamber out of the window last night and reach the ground. A light attracted my notice, and I was cautiously moving towards it with a view to finding out whether friend or foe was to be found whence it came, when I came upon you, Mr Merton. The rest you know.”

We waited for a moment when Miss Siscombe paused. As she did not go on, I remarked.

“Surely that is not all ?”

“Indeed it is,” was her reply.

“But you have not told us why you were made a prisoner down here? What had you done?”

“There you ask a question that I myself am unable to answer.”

“Indeed,” I said, “and how do you account for the peculiar abhorrence you appear to have for the ‘doctor’ and his allies?”

“Any woman,” replied Miss Siscombe drily, “would feel as I do had she been attacked and detained as I have.”

I agreed that it was so, but was conscious of a feeling of disappointment in Miss Siscombe's story.

"Then you never heard anything that led you to entertain any idea as to the exact nature of the business in which the 'doctor' and his friends are engaged?"

"No, I hardly encountered any of the three, and my frequent cries for help went unnoticed by the wretches who actually occupied, during the day, the room adjoining mine."

"Then I see that you sometimes overheard remarks through the wall," observed Negrett quietly.

"I did," said the lady, "though I don't know how you guessed that it was so. I overheard one or two things, such as references to some society, allusions to people known by letters instead of names, and to notices in the 'agony' column of some paper."

"And also the details of your capture," added Negrett; and I perceived how he had inferred that the division wall between the room occupied by Miss Siscombe and that of the 'doctor' and his confrères was sufficiently thin for conversation in one room to be overheard in the other.

"And you heard no name mentioned, then?" I asked.

"Only one," was the reply, "namely, that of some person who lived on a hill-top at Ealing. I noticed the name, because I was interested in the town at which Mr FitzGerald lives, and listened for everything that was said about it. Some one or other

connected with the ‘doctor,’ as you call him—he is known to the others as ‘T.’—lives in a half-empty house on a hill at Ealing, and according to ‘T.’ and his companions, who are called ‘Y.’ and ‘S.,’ this man has done something very foolish and contrary to some rule. Accordingly ‘S.’—I think it was ‘S.’—was sent to visit this man and threaten him with some penalty if he did not perform some deed. ‘S.’ departed, and so did ‘Y.,’ and only ‘T.’ remained. But another man known as ‘R.’ once or twice came and talked with ‘T.’ That is all.”

“And you say you heard the name of this man who has done something foolish?” I remarked, questioningly.

“Yes, he was generally referred to by these men, in their absurd fashion, by the letter which is the initial of his surname—V. But once I heard one of them allude to him as Venwall.”

When Miss Siscombe pronounced this name, I looked across at Negrett, who had been following the narrative with interest. As I half expected to discover, his face had suddenly lost what colour there had been in it before, and I knew for a fact that certain suspicions of mine were well-founded. For the name Venwall was that of the man (and likewise of his cousin, a person of ill-repute) who was convicted in the famous “Farloe Forgery Case!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN INTERRUPTED CONVERSATION

To my mind there no longer remained any doubt but that the clue to the mystery of Negrett, if not supplied me by the detective himself—which, now that he seemed to have recovered from his injuries, was doubtful—must be found in the “Farloe Forgery Case.”

My reasons for coming to such a decision need hardly be detailed.

In the first place—I will set down the points for simplicity’s sake — Wallace Negrett had brought his name prominently before the public by his evidence in the case. (If I recollect right he was responsible for a pretty piece of work that, so far as its completeness went, would have done credit to Euclid himself—a man, by the way, who must surely have made a grand detective had he pursued his problems further afield.) That Negrett had some reason for not wishing me to in any way connect the present case with that referred to was plain from the consternation he evinced every time I alluded to the latter case. Consequently, no further proof was needed that the Ealing and Crowley

Park mysteries were in some way the outcome of the forgery affair.

But now I had proof that what had formerly been only a theory was indeed fact. Venwall, one of the members of the remarkable society that had its headquarters at the bungalow, was also (unless coincidence was playing an outrageous trick) one of the Venwalls concerned in the forgery case. And it was quite plain which Venwall it was, since he whose Christian name was Barnard still lingered in one of H.M.'s convict establishments!

Cavendish Venwall, then — the cousin of the convicted man, and a creature as notorious as he was said to be eccentric — was the "V." of the gang which numbered among its members my late partner — and, as I greatly feared, her whom I had hoped to make the future partner of my joys and sorrows. At present, in spite of the excitement of the chase, as I may call it, the latter emotions prevailed in my heart when my thoughts turned for a moment from the case, and, in the spirit, I was standing at midnight outside the house in Aubrey Square, staring blankly at a man's figure on the yellow blind of a first-floor window.

It was a couple of hours later that I settled down in the one arm-chair the sitting-room possessed, and suggested that Negrett should exchange confidences with me. In the interim I had seen Miss Siscombe off at Crowley Park Station on her way home, carefully placing her in a compartment occupied by some ladies whose luggage was labelled

for "Baker Street," and equally careful to ascertain that none of her late gaolers were in the train.

Leaving the station, I at once returned to the inn, knowing that it would be superfluous for me to proceed to the bungalow and have a look at that desirable residence in daylight, since the police officer was keeping a keen watch there on the movements of Rodney and the others.

Negrett did not take kindly to my proposal at first. I perceived that he was deliberating upon his course of action, and, knowing the man as I now did, I allowed him several minutes before repeating the question.

"Merton," he said at length, "I really don't see how my movements and plans concern you. Fully conscious though I am of my indebtedness to you for your assistance last night, I must remind you that we are not working together. You are—and have been throughout—acting on your own account, and I on mine. Tell me, though, what were you doing down here yesterday? I gather that it was only by chance you discovered the young lady who has just left us, and who, not unknown to me, was kidnapped by the inhabitants of 'Beehive Cottage'—in which, I believe, you expect to find the clue to the mystery of the Ealing house."

I explained in as few words as possible that I had come with the intention of rescuing Miss Siscombe, mentioning how I had inferred that those responsible for the affair at Ealing were to be found at the bungalow. As I was not surprised to find, Negrett had (at least he said so) reached the same

conclusion by the same steps in his investigation as I, and I pointed out to him, in tones of triumph, perhaps, that I now perceived he had only been trying to put me off the track by depreciating the nature of the affair, though he had been correct in his statement that the man found dead in the hill-top house had met his fate by drowning.

"I confess," said the Scotland Yard man, shame-facedly, "that I acted under the influence of professional jealousy. I saw you were a smart man, Mr Merton, and feared that my reputation was at stake when you were on the same case as I." But I neither believed his explanation nor took to heart his flattery.

Instead, I observed:—

"You forget how much I know about that forgery case."

He had evidently expected that I would again broach the subject, for he did not, as before, change colour.

"How much?" he queried. "Should it not be, 'How little'?"

"You under-estimate my knowledge," I replied a trifle hotly, "just as you did the Ealing case—at first!" And I proceeded to tell him how I had overseen the attack made upon him by "S." and the eventual committal of his body to the passing barge. Whereupon he told me that the fall upon the deck of the barge had apparently restored consciousness to him—that and the dousing with dirty water that a bargeman, who soon discovered

his presence, was good enough to bestow before landing him at the wharf below the village.

"To show you that I know more than you imagine," I then observed, "let me remark I am aware of the fact that your old friend, Mr Cavendish Venwall, resides with others at Beehive Cottage—they are busy bees, are the inmates of the bungalow! Perhaps it was to visit Mr Venwall that you came down to Crowley Park last night?"

My words had the desired effect. Negrett rose on his couch excitedly.

"Are you sure that Venwall—Cavendish Venwall—is up there?"—pointing in the direction of the bungalow. "And how did you find out I knew him? He is no friend of mine."

"Steady, sir," I replied; "one question at a time. I see that you *do* know Mr Venwall, and apparently not only as a witness in the Farloe Forgery case. I am not sure that your friend is still at the bungalow, but I trust he is. If he is not at the bottom of the whole business my name is not what it is!"

"But—" he stammered excitedly, "it wasn't he that struck me, eh?"

"I think not," I answered cautiously. "I presume he would have waited to learn the nature of your errand before attacking you so blood-thirstily." (I had not mentioned that I believed the blow he received was evidently intended for myself, and consequently had heard his expressions of amazement that he should have been attacked without

notice. Now it appeared that he would not have been surprised to learn that it was Cavendish Venwall who had been his assailant. Why, I wondered, was there enmity between the two who had both been such important witnesses against Barnard Venwall in his trial for the Farloe Forgeries?)

"Tell me," he began, bending forward, so as to watch for my reply, when an interruption occurred.

The landlady entered, admitting with her a sound of weeping from the rear.

"Please, sir," she said, turning to me, "pardon-ing me for troubling you, sir, which I am sorry to do, but the policeman's wife is waiting to see you, sir. Important, she says, and is crying fit to break her pore heart."

"Show her in," I said, surprised at the intelligence, and not without a feeling of agitation as to the cause of her errand.

A pale-faced, thin, little woman shuffled softly into the room, and approached me in nervous haste.

"Please, sir," she cried, half hysterically, "I believe summat's come to my poor 'usband. He told me he was on a job for a gent up 'ere, and I come up to see whether you noo anythink about 'im. 'E said, when 'e came in about eight this morning, that 'e 'ad to keep 'is eye on that Bee'ive Cottage, which is said to be 'aunted, and when I took 'im up 'is dinner just now 'e wasn't there, and what should I see in the garden—not that I dared to go

and fetch it, though I managed to rake it out with a stick—but my poor man's 'at 'ere—is perlice 'at—lying in the mud. Oh, oh, summat's come to 'im, I'm fearing." Whereupon she broke down and wept profusely on the landlady's motherly arm.

But the information alarmed me beyond description. The members of the society had discovered that they were watched! They were three (or possibly four) to one! To prevent the news of their escape being communicated to the authorities they had taken steps to remove the unfortunate policeman. But how and where?

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN THE BASEMENT OF THE BUNGALOW

I GLANCED significantly at Negrett as he rose painfully from the sofa. He returned my glance with an ominous shake of his head, and I perceived he feared, as I did, that we should find that foul play had been the cause of the local policeman's disappearance.

"Let us go at once," he said. "If it is as this woman says, we must lose no time in visiting 'Beehive Cottage.' But have no fears for your husband's safety," he added, addressing the weeping wife. "Nothing serious may have come to him. He is a strong man, and can defend himself if necessary. Come, Merton, let me take your arm and we will be off."

I saw that the heat of the chase was impelling him as it was me, when we turned into the lane, dark even in daylight, that led to the bungalow.

"I pity the poor woman," I muttered to the detective, as, gripping my arm, he limped by my side, weaker than he endeavoured to make out.

Negrett made no reply. The man seemed to have so many sides to his character, that each incident

appeared to reflect him in a different light. Now he showed every sign of pity for the policeman's wife; whereas the sight of the battered corpse in the lonely house, with the handcuffed creature attached, had merely excited his interest. Defiant and patronising as he had formerly been to me, he now addressed me as a friend of long standing, though evincing a certain dread of my questions that was unmistakable. To me he appeared now as quite a different person from the Scotland Yard detective who had accompanied me to Ealing. He seemed crushed; yet it was not by defeat, for as yet no one could claim any victory. Perhaps it was his injury that had affected him in this manner. But, as I caught a queer expression in his eyes, I wondered whether, indeed, it was fear that had worked the transformation. And, if so, was it fear of me? Had I really, as I hoped, the whip-hand of him? Was the bloodhound a criminal? If not, why this dread that I fancied I read in his youthful face?

The bungalow looked as grey and gloomy as ever through its belt of dark trees when we came in sight of it, and heard theplash of waters as a barge outlined against the yellow bank passed down the canal that skirted the garden of Beehive Cottage. The sound was one that drew a shudder from my companion, and recalled to me very vividly the incidents of the past night. I had seen what I believed was the committal of Negrett's body to the depths of the canal. What would the fate of the policeman prove to be?

Now that we had reached the very gates of the bungalow, we paused to decide upon our course of action. In the excitement of the moment we had failed to remember that we were but two—and one of those two an invalid—against at least three. What could we do against these odds?

Plainly it was a case of wit being required where brute force was an impossibility.

Our final decision was that we should cautiously creep through the bushes, get as near to the windows of the bungalow as we could without being seen, and ascertain whether or no the house was still inhabited.

I, myself, was much inclined to suspect that our birds had flown. Otherwise, why should they take steps to remove the policeman, whose watch outside the gates could not in any way harm them, since from the road it was impossible to distinguish anything that transpired in the low building known as Beehive Cottage?

Our vigil was not a long one. Satisfied that none of the windows in the front of the house were those of rooms any of which were occupied by a living creature, we waxed bold enough to approach the front door. To our surprise, we found that this could be simply negotiated by turning the handle. Within half a minute we were inside. The hall was a large and barely-furnished one. Out of it led three or four rooms presenting an equally inhospitable appearance. All were empty.

We softly ascended the staircase. There was a lack of carpet that made silent progress almost an

impossibility. But, as no sounds disturbed the silence except those we ourselves made, this did not matter. Room by room, we searched the whole house. There was no sign of life throughout, and nothing that seemed in any way likely to assist my investigation. Now only the basement remained, and here we recognised that our greatest danger lay.

Perhaps when we first entered the house the occupants were within, and seeing that we were bent upon searching the rooms, had retired to the darkness of the cellars, there to wait until we departed. Unfortunately, neither of us had matches, and we were consequently compelled to prosecute our search in thick darkness.

Only with difficulty could Negrett proceed without my assistance, and in the dark he was more than useless as an assistant.

A strong odour pervaded the atmosphere of the basement. For a moment I wondered inwardly where I had detected such an odour in the air before. Then, like a flash, recollection came to me with a force that almost frightened me, though not for myself.

It was in the lonely house on the hill at Ealing that I had scented the sickly smell—the odour of a potent drug!

When I recalled the circumstances under which I had experienced the same sensation, I shuddered as I anticipated some such villainy in this case as had characterised that of the Ealing house.

Even as I thought thus, I felt Negrett's grip

tighten on my arm. His injuries had unmanned him, and it was with a decided expression of nervous expectancy that he exclaimed, "What's that?"

But I had heard the sound too. Was I dreaming of that other scene, which death alone will erase from my memory, or was it the clank of metal that fell upon my ear as I paused to listen? And that low moan as of pain, was it merely an imaginary echo of the cry of the captive whom I had since come to associate with the man "S."?

Imagination plays strange tricks on us mortals, especially in the dark. But these sounds were not figments of an imaginative brain.

A ray of light filtered through a dust-coated window on one side of the passage, and it fell upon something that moved!

It was a repetition of the affair in the house on the hill.

A man's form was stretched upon the floor, his hands fastened together by something that shone with a metal glint!

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SECRET SOLVED

IT may only have been a natural means of securing their prisoner, but to me it seemed that the drugging of the village constable and fastening his hands together with handcuffs such as the police use, was some trick of vengeance for his own similar treatment, carried out by the man "S.," whom by this time I had come to consider nothing short of a human fiend.

The constable was not dead when we found him. In fact, only a few minutes elapsed before we were able to assist his return to consciousness by releasing his clothes and bathing his head with cold water from a conveniently situated tap.

He scanned our faces nervously in the dark when he opened his eyes, expecting, no doubt, to find that his enemies were still with him. This expression, when he recognised us, gave way to one of delight mingled with sheepish anticipation of rebuke for neglecting his duty; for, as he eventually explained to us when once we had reached the open air, he had been half-asleep, leaning upon the garden gate, when some one had crept up from

one side and stunned him with a blow that deprived him of his senses.

His apologies were profuse, and I was, of course, compelled to accept them, realising the truth of the venerable proverb anent spilt milk. But I could not disguise my annoyance that at the eleventh hour, so to speak, our birds had flown. Knowing their cunning, as I did, I guessed that they would not attempt to leave the neighbourhood by train. Perhaps they had done so on cycles, possibly by the canal. At any rate, for the present we had lost sight of them, and could only trust to good fortune to assist us in their pursuit. Negrett hastened to communicate a description of the doctor, "S." and Rodney to Scotland Yard, and thus to every police station in the kingdom. This appeared to be all that could be done.

But I had yet to hear Wallace Negrett's own story; and when I had dismissed the policeman with a promise that I would not report his carelessness to the authorities, I accordingly assisted the young detective back to the inn, and there told him bluntly that I must know all. Once again he remonstrated, but when I made use of veiled threats, finding my powers of persuasion unavailing, he rose, locked the door of the room in which we were, and resumed his seat, pale-faced and with profuse perspiration shining from his brow.

"Merton," he began, "I'm a fool. I doubt if you know enough of the secret that I confess I hold to cause investigation to be made by my principals, but the wound your friend gave me has upset me.

I'm all nerves, and I have decided to unburden myself to you. I have done wrong, and it is more of a confession than an interesting announcement that I am going to make to you. I cannot ask you to be an accessory after the fact, and retain my secret, but I do beg of you to use your judgment as to when to reveal the story to the world and your natural kindness in treating me (may I hope?) as a friend. First, then, let me tell you that I am able to clear up much that is mysterious to you. How? Why? Partly because I visited the house on the hill-top on the day before that on which you made so strange a discovery there!"

"On the day before I visited the house," I gasped in astonishment, "then—then had you anything to do with the discovery we made there?"

"No, indeed," replied Negrett, almost smiling at the suggestion, "but I saw there—. However, I had better begin at the very commencement.

"I was quite new to the Yard when they first took me on. Unlike most detectives, I had not served my apprenticeship in the force as a constable. I was young and ambitious. For some reason or other they gave me the Farloe Forgeries case to work up under another man, who, however, was taken ill almost at the opening of the affair, and was compelled to retire. I was thus left in charge of the business.

"My task was to find out who perpetrated the forgeries. In vain did I endeavour to discover the forger's identity. Then one day a man called upon me and offered to point out the criminal. He told

me that he was a friend, in fact a nephew, of Sir Alfred Farloe, whose name had been forged on certain valuable documents, which, as you will remember, might have led to the baronet's ruin. The actual forgeries were, in fact, apparently malicious attempts to bankrupt the old gentleman.

"Well, when this man came to me with so desirable an offer I never took the trouble to find out anything about his *bond fides*. I was so anxious to succeed in my first case that I think I would have sold my soul if by so doing I could have made sure of success.

"The man told me his name was Cavendish Venwall, and that he was acting in the interests of justice, and was impelled by no personal motive when he warned me to keep an eye on his cousin, Barnard Venwall.

"Without difficulty I obtained a specimen of Barnard's handwriting (supplied by Cavendish) and had it compared with the forged signatures. The experts were divided in their opinion, but all confessed that there were distinct similarity—invisible to the untrained eye—in both. I decided to keep my eye on Barnard, who lived with his mother and sister somewhere in the suburbs, and soon learned that he had recently quarrelled with his uncle, Sir Alfred, and had been known to use rash words when speaking of the baronet's behaviour to him. I believed I had enough evidence of his guilt to justify my application for a warrant, and Barnard Venwall was accordingly arrested, protesting his innocence. From words he let fall,

a suspicion was raised in my mind as to whether his cousin, Cavendish, had some reason for wishing him to be accused. That reason was demonstrated to me not long after my suspicions had been aroused. In my official capacity I was able to peruse the will of Sir Alfred, executed some years before, and learned from it that Farloe left the bulk of his fortune to Barnard—provided he could show an untarnished reputation, and in the event of that gentleman predeceasing him—or being decided to have lost or blemished his good reputation—to Cavendish Venwall, the other nephew!

"Here, to be sure, was sufficient motive for the latter's behaviour. But, if Barnard were not guilty, who was? Could it be Cavendish? Yes! For within a day or two of perusing the will a chance word of Cavendish's convinced me that he alone was responsible for the forgeries. He had had no quarrel with his uncle, but, knowing that Sir Alfred's days were numbered, and that the baronet had not altered his will, he had doubtless determined to make sure of securing the Farloe fortune by ruining his cousin's reputation—causing him to be convicted of crime. He had himself committed the forgeries, carefully and cunningly imitating the signatures in Barnard's own writing.

"But when I made these deductions Barnard was already arrested and the trial was imminent. If my error—my blunder—were laid bare it would mean disgrace and the ruin of my hopes.

"Perhaps, Merton, you don't know what it is

to be dominated by Ambition? I do, alas! Had I had less ambition I might not have fallen, but—do not let me deal with possibilities when it is facts that concern my story.

“Merton, I could not stand disgrace. Anything was better than my ruin. I had my old mother then dependent upon me for her daily bread. To her I was an idol. My degradation would have killed her before her time. But it was not thoughts of her that impelled me to take the course I did. It was that d——d Ambition which has ruined my career!

“It was, oh, very easy to arrange matters so that I should seem rather to have greatly distinguished myself than have blundered and failed.

“There was only one link wanted in the chain of evidence against Barnard Venwall. Unless I strengthened it, it might, probably would, prove a loophole for his escape. It was this. I could not prove that he had so much as suggested forgery, that he had the ability to forge, or even, except perhaps by the conflicting evidence of the writing experts, that he and he alone must have forged his uncle’s name, not once but several times.

“But if now, say in the drawer of Barnard’s private desk in his own room, I were to find a sheet of paper covered with attempts at Sir Alfred’s signature besides ordinary samples of the writing of Barnard Venwall, what then?

“Why, the missing link would be supplied!”

“Great heaven, Negrett,” I interposed at this point, as my companion paused, “you don’t tell

me that *you* placed the incriminating sheet of writing in the prisoner's drawer, that *you* were responsible for that writing, that, owing to *your* machinations an innocent man was condemned?"

Negrett replied with a sudden snarl that exhibited yet another side of his remarkable character.

"Do you think," he snapped, "that even the condemnation of an innocent man could stand against my ambition!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE HISTORY OF THE LEAGUE

"YES, Merton, I was responsible for Barnard Venwall's conviction. My evidence condemned him. *I* found the paper I had placed in the drawer a few hours before!

"Now I knew Cavendish's secret and he knew mine. We were in the swim together. His rise and fall would be mine, mine his. He got the fortune that should have been Barnard's; I earned promotion.

"Once I had fallen, I was not going to atone for the first misdemeanour by any of the recognised means, and I did not fail to blackmail Cavendish when he came into his money. I never lost sight of him. He was not, perhaps, more under my thumb than I under his, but I had the greater amount of audacity, and I found Mr Venwall was a good subject to draw upon when times were bad.

"It was only natural that, keeping him in sight as I did (not, however, to the neglect of my business at the Yard), I was able to learn of everything he did. Consequently I am in a position to tell you all concerning the 'Secret Society,' as you have

dramatically christened it, of which he was a member.

"It was soon after he came into the money obtained by fraud that he met a certain Dr Tregaskis, the maddest, most hare-brained, foolhardy, middle-aged 'young' blood in London. The doctor cultivated the acquaintance of Cavendish merely because the latter had money to throw away. This man suggested the formation of a club—a private exclusive club—for men sworn to remain unmarried.

"The germ of the idea in itself was all right, but the carrying out of the scheme changed the original suggestion altogether. A society to be known as the A.M.L. (Anti-Matrimonial League) was formed, and some half-dozen members elected. The president was Tregaskis, and the other members were Cavendish Venwall, Alfred Rodney, Simpson Samuells, Maurice Deacon, and another whose name I do not recollect. All, of course, were bachelors; each and all took a solemn vow, under awe-inspiring conditions, to be true to the society and eschew the fair sex.

"The mad hatter of a Tregaskis then drew up a code of rules, to which all the members added their signatures. One of these was that the punishment of any member proving faithless to the society and contracting a matrimonial alliance should be Death—such death to be dealt out by another member, that member being selected by lot!

"To my mind there can be no doubt but that Cavendish and probably all the remaining members

of the League, with one exception, treated the whole affair more or less as a joke. Doubtless they intended at the time to remain bachelors, but they little knew that in reality they were actually signing a promise for life never to marry or even fall in love. The one exception I have referred to was Simpson Samuell, than whom no more brutal rascal ever lived."

"Unless I am very far wrong, he was the man that struck you down in the garden of the bungalow, and probably attacked the policeman also," I observed.

"Was it indeed Samuell, or 'S.' as he is known to the members of the League, who gave me that blow in the dark?" exclaimed Negrett, as his hand sought the wound in his chest, which still pained him, as I saw by the uneasiness of his movements.

"Yes, it was 'S.' who attacked you, 'S.' the man who was fastened to the corpse discovered in the house on the hill-top. By the way, how was it you failed to recognise the scoundrel when you found him there?"

"Though I have heard from Cavendish — and other reliable sources of information—of this man's villainy, I had never met him before the occasion you refer to. I was not even aware until this moment that it was he. But to resume.

"The members of the League separated, each took up some profession or mode of killing time, and decided to communicate by means of advertisements in one of the morning papers. They were

to be known to one another and addressed by the initials of their surnames. Thus Rodney (by the way, I presume he is no relation to your business partner?) was known as ‘R.’ Samuells as ‘S.’ and so on. This use of initials is not uncommon among secret societies, otherwise your story would have convinced me from the first that I was dealing with the A.M.L.

“The first incident of any note connected with the League occurred when Deacon—or rather ‘D.’—fell in love with some girl and sent in his resignation to the president, stating that he presumed he could retire from the League without molestation, particularly as his fiancée was an Italian, and he intended after his marriage to live abroad.

“A meeting of the League was called, and the matter was discussed. Venwall, Samuells, and Tregaskis refused to allow his retirement, while the two remaining members were indifferent. Deacon was accordingly informed that if he broke the rules of the society, he must expect his faithlessness to be rewarded as the rules decreed.

“The young man still treated the matter as a joke, replied in jocular terms through the ‘agony’ column of the *Daily Journal*, and was quietly married in London in due course. He left England with his bride shortly after, in a vessel bound for Brindisi.

“On the voyage he, according to the ship’s log, had the misfortune to fall overboard, when he was drowned before help could reach him. You may decide whether or no his death was the result of an acci-

dent when I inform you that by a mere chance I discovered that among the passengers was a man answering in every respect to the description of Simpson Samuell!"

"Do you mean to say," I broke in, "that you allowed this discovery to remain a secret until now?"

"What else could I do without proof?" replied the detective, feebly. "The fact that 'S.' was one of the passengers would not satisfy a jury that a crime had been committed. The other passengers would, for instance, recall the sympathetic behaviour of the man I refer to towards the bride-widow. But, frankly, I believe that this was the first crime connected with the League. It was not the last, as you must know. The rest, though as far as I am aware, have not been of so serious a character.

"It was my friend — I will call him friend, though I have always hated and despised him, as much as he no doubt has me—Cavendish Venwall that next disobeyed the rules of his League so far as to fall in love with a girl whose name I do not know. From what I have gathered, though, from your own conversation and Miss Siscombe's remarks, I am convinced that our late lady friend's lover of Ealing is none other than Mr Cavendish Venwall, of the A.M. League!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE ERRAND OF SIMPSON SAMUELLS

"I HAD some suspicions about Miss Siscombe's lover," I cried, "but not that he too was a member of the League. Once, though, I even suspected you of being a member."

"Once," interposed Negrett, "I thought of myself joining when I realised I had fallen so low that it was hardly possible to fall lower."

"But about Cavendish Venwall's love adventure?" I next said, for I was more than interested in the narrative.

"It was fatal in the extreme," said my companion, "that is, to me. But for his love affair there would have been no Ealing mystery, no intervention of Mr Stanley Frank Merton, no exposure of the Farloe forgery fraud.

"If Simpson Samuells had had his way, I have no doubt the marriage of Cavendish Venwall would have been allowed to take place, after which the rascal 'S.' would have elected to carry out the punishment laid down in the League's code of rules. But Rodney and the president, mad though the latter may be, showed their affection for Ven-

wall by first reasoning with him, and eventually threatening him that if he married no power on earth would stop ‘S.’ from dogging him to his doom.

“Unfortunately, all these threats availed nothing. Cavendish was in love, and even his connection with the League did not prevent him from carrying on his affair with the lady, who without doubt is Miss Siscombe.

“But Venwall is no fool, and he had not forgotten the fate of Maurice Deacon when he refused to give up the girl of his choice. In the days of which I am speaking, he was living in London. Rodney also resided in town. The others shared the large house near here, known as ‘Beehive Cottage’.

“It was with the idea of outwitting his fellow-members of the League that Venwall disappeared from his flat in London and took the hill-top house at Ealing, which he used more or less as a place to change his identity, so to speak. He could not give up his club (and actually slept there, I believe), and when he met his lady-love he was compelled to assume his “Sunday best.” Thus, when going to town, he donned the clothes he had been in the habit of wearing. On other occasions he walked abroad from the house on the hill disguised by means of a false moustache and common clothes. His idea was to hurry on his engagement with the lady we now know to be Miss Siscombe, then get married and fly the country.

“However, the cunning of Samuell was as great

as that of Venwall, and the former quickly got on to Cavendish's tracks and ran him to earth at Ealing. He pretended that he came as a friend, and warned him that unless he could quickly get married and escape, Rodney and the others would find out his hiding-place. But Venwall was not to be so easily taken in, though he pretended to accept the advice of 'S.' in the spirit in which it appeared to be given.

"The rest of the story is only inference. If you can suggest anything that seems more probable than my own deduction, say so.

"Tregaskis and Rodney, wishing to save Venwall, and having also traced the latter to Ealing, next, with the assistance of the remaining member (whose name, as I have said, I forgot), carry out the abduction of Miss Siscombe in the manner described by that lady. They hold her in detention, hoping, presumably, to thus cool Venwall's ardour and extinguish his affection for her. But, learning that Miss Siscombe has disappeared (her description was advertised in various papers, including, unless I am very much in the wrong, the *Journal*, the organ used, as you know, by the members of the League), Venwall allows his anger to get the better of him, and he writes to the president of the society, stating that unless the girl be at once released he will communicate with the police. No other action on his part could induce them to take such drastic measures as, according to what you heard through the telephone, they do, when they despatch Samuels to Ealing. They realise,

of course, that in the inquiry that must necessarily follow a police investigation of their affairs, the true story of Deacon's death will leak out. And, mad or not, Tregaskis evidently takes fright and allows Samuells to travel to Ealing to murder Venwall, if he still intends to carry out his threat.

"‘S.’ thus despatched, reaches Ealing and calls upon Cavendish. In the house on the hill he finds Venwall. The latter, no doubt, after conversation, attacks the threatening Samuells, overpowers and drugs him. To prevent his escape on becoming sensible, Venwall fastens him by means of handcuffs (concerning which more anon) to the corpse of the man drowned in this neighbourhood, which—why I do not know—had been sent from here in a packing case to the house on the hill.

"Then, fearing that other members of the League may follow him, he leaves the house for London. What his intentions are it is difficult to say."

Negrett paused at this point, and there was silence for a moment in the little room in which we sat.

The mystery was being quickly deprived of the shroud that made it such, and I began to wonder when I should learn of my Carline's connection with the affair. Perhaps, after all, it would prove to be only a secondary one. If so, then Heaven be thanked, for there had been a time when I had been faithless enough to believe her guilty of the utmost complicity in the dark matter.

It was when Negrett ended his story, as I have

said, that I recalled the incident to which I have previously referred, concerning the papers I believed he had discovered on the corpse.

I mentioned the fact to my companion, and was surprised to see that he showed both annoyance and astonishment at my knowledge of the episode.

"I wanted to hide that little point from you," he said sulkily, "but I see you know all, and may as well therefore tell you all."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHAT MR NEGRETT WISHED TO HIDE

I SAT without speaking, eagerly waiting for my companion's next revelation. I perceived that my hour had come. Wallace Negrett saw he could hide nothing from me. Not that I could boast of any action of mine, any cleverness on my part, having conducted to this state of affairs, for I had been favoured by fortune throughout.

"Yes," said the young man from Scotland Yard, "the papers you saw in my hand were indeed some that I had discovered in the pocket of the clothes in which the corpse was dressed. I have those papers in my pocket now."

"And they consist—?" I said excitedly.

"Of the confession of our crime, written and signed by Cavendish Venwall!"

To say that I was astounded by this announcement would be to underestimate the nature of my feelings when Negrett spoke thus.

"Ah," I stammered at length, "then your behaviour from the first is explained. You feared that if the matter received great publicity your

true connection with the Farloe Forgery case would leak out?"

"Precisely," was the reply. "I feared my ruin—the ruin that alone awaits me now that I have told you all."

"That," I observed coldly, "is a question that does not concern us at the moment. But may I see the 'Confession?'"

Fumbling in his breast coat pocket, Negrett produced a number of sheets of paper, at the head of one of which was written, in small but distinct lettering, the words:—

"Confession of Crime.

"Farloe Forgery Case. True Account of
"The facts as they actually were, described
by C. V."

Glancing through the manuscript I saw at once that, according to this written statement, the incidents in the affair portrayed by Wallace Negrett had been correctly supplied to me.

Without a doubt the unhappy Barnard Venwall, who was even now languishing in a convict establishment, was as innocent of the forgeries as was I myself! Cavendish, and he alone, was guilty, but Negrett was an accessory after the fact, and, in my opinion, an equally guilty party.

"Tell me," I said suddenly, "how was it that you did not recognise from the very beginning that the affair at the empty house was the work of the A.M. League, whose machinations were well known to you?"

"Perhaps," replied Negrett, "I did know! Or

perhaps I guessed that such was the case! But I can, in the ordinary way, conceal my feelings—keep my features in proper control. When you informed me of what you had heard through the medium of the telephone, I did, to be sure, anticipate that the crime—it then appeared to be a case of murder—was the work of the League. Consequently my interest in the business was very great—greater even than you ever guessed. I did not know at the time that Cavendish Venwall was lying hid at Ealing, or I should have guessed what had happened, having learned of the trouble resulting from his fatal love-making. The mention of the ‘agony’ column and the use of the initials as forms of address first led me to suspect that the Ealing case in some way or other concerned the League. When we reached the house, though, and I saw the corpse, I knew it was as I suspected.”

“Then you recognised the dead man?”

“No, but at first I thought I did. Of course the face was battered beyond recognition, but the body appeared at first glance to be without doubt that of my accomplice—I use the hard word you have yourself applied to him—Cavendish Venwall.

“This caused me so much surprise that I paid little attention to the other man, the living one; though even had I taken the trouble to closely examine him I should not have been any the wiser, since, as I have already said, I have never—until last night—met Samuell, or ‘S.’, as he is better known to me.

“You may imagine, therefore, that it was with

extreme interest I examined the pockets of the dead man, whom I believed to be Cavendish. This confession was in one of them. I succeeded in stowing it away before you returned from a search of the premises. At least I believed you had not seen the papers, but therein I now learn I was wrong."

"And when did you discover that the dead man was not Cavendish Venwall?"

"When, to make sure of the fact, I turned up the sleeve of his coat and shirt and discovered that the tattooed star on Venwall's arm was now conspicuous by its absence!"

"Then the matter became more serious. I saw what the scheme was. I understood Venwall's artfulness."

"I hardly understand you," I broke in at this point.

"Why," answered Negrett, "I saw that the whole business was a 'blind.' I knew Cavendish wished to marry the girl with whom he had become acquainted. I was also aware that the League refused to permit him to do so. My close acquaintanceship with Venwall led me to expect he would adopt drastic measures to secure his end. In some way or other he had obtained this body (that of some man who was about the same size as himself), which my more or less practiced eye told me was that of a drowned person. He had made the features unrecognisable by crushing the face in some way. He had clothed the body in some of his own garments, and with some absurd idea of clear-

ing his conscience of the forgery of Sir Alfred Farloe's name, he had written out that confession and placed it in the pocket of the individual who was to appear to the world (and chiefly to the police and the League) to be himself!"

I was beginning to see that the mystery was rapidly approaching its final stage, and awaited with extreme interest every word of my companion.

"His object is quite plain. The police would learn that there had been a miscarriage of justice. Injured Barnard Venwall, for whom Cavendish was probably now sorry, would be released, and since he (Cavendish), the real forger, would be believed to be dead, he ran little or no risk of danger from this source. The League would also learn of his death, and would therefore take no further steps in the matter of his marriage. Meanwhile he himself would be at liberty to marry Miss Siscombe (as we now know his loved one is). You will see that his scheme was not only a most ingenious but an extremely practicable one. Unfortunately for him he was surprised in the middle of carrying it out."

"How?" I asked.

"By the arrival of 'S,'" was Negrett's reply. "Samuell arrived on the scene, probably entering by the window we did. Cavendish saw that his scheme was frustrated, and in his rage he no doubt attacked the rascal and drugged him with the very potent stuff he was in the habit of taking for insomnia. I may as well mention in passing that this drug was recommended to him by Dr Tre-

gaskis, who himself used it for the same purpose, and eventually found it useful as a means of making the policeman here unable to communicate with us to-day.

"In order to make sure of 'S.', Cavendish fastened him with one of two pairs of handcuffs that I had myself given him—more for a joke than anything else—some time before, the other pair having evidently been given to Tregaskis or one of the other members of the League, since it was used to secure the policeman in the cell of the bungalow.

"This done, Cavendish apparently left the house, forgetting that, though his scheme of destroying his identity had failed, he had left this document in the pseudo-Cavendish's pocket. He apparently forgot the existence of the paper until next day, when he returned to the house to recover it, only to find, though, that the police had arrived before him."

"The police? When? How?"

"Well, we ourselves, to be precise. The man that you saw looking over the wall when we emerged from the house on the hill was *none other than Cavendish Venwall!*"

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE IDENTITY OF THE STRANGER

DAYLIGHT, to speak metaphorically, was breaking through the tangle of mysteries in which I had been enveloped but a short time before. As Mr Wallace Negrett's narrative grew, so did my spirits rise. And why? Principally because, though the man from Scotland Yard appeared to know everything about the mystery, as yet he had betrayed no knowledge of my Carline's connection with the strange affair. That, in spite of this, that connection was an undoubted one, did not disturb me greatly, since, if I alone knew of it, what matter? And I began to hope that neither Tregaskis nor his confrères would be captured, since at their inevitable trial my dear one's name must certainly leak out, since she was concerned, though to what extent I knew not.

"Then the man we saw looking over the wall at the top of the hill was Cavendish Venwall?" I repeated, when Negrett had made this startling announcement.

"Certainly. I recognised him at once, but was careful not to permit him to distinguish me. And,

to my mind, there can be no doubt but that he returned for this incriminating document, which, since he had, so far as the League was concerned, failed to destroy his own identity, was a dangerous clue to fall into the hands of the police. Of course, had he known that I was in charge of the case, he would not have troubled himself so much. As it is, he is probably hourly expecting to find the grip of the law on his collar. It was in the hope of finding him at Beehive Cottage that I repaired thither last night."

"But why," I asked, "knowing as you did his present relations with Tregaskis and the others, did you hope to find him there?"

"I argued," replied Negrett, "that he would consider the headquarters of the League the safest hiding-place under the circumstances, since it was from the police now, and not from the A.M. members, that danger was likely to come. However, had I deliberated more thoughtfully on the matter, I should have decided that after his treatment of 'S.' (Samuels) he would not dare to place himself in the hands of the League, unless he realised that the members would be glad, rather than enraged, to learn how the bloodthirsty rascal had been dealt with.

"Moreover, I took a search-warrant with me to frighten Cavendish and make him do what I have long been striving to make him do—namely, sign a document confessing that it was he who forged the writing of his cousin and placed the sheet of attempted signatures in Barnard's desk. Thus

I should then be clear and free from this everlasting worry and dread that has been gnawing at my heart.

"I had, as I have already said, called upon Cavendish Venwall on the eve of your discovery at Ealing. I had caught sight of him at the window of the hill-top house, and he had seen me. Consequently, guessing the motive that brought me there, or, perhaps, fearing to be detected with the suicide's corpse in the room in which he was preparing for his ingenious 'coup,' he refused to reply to my continued knocking at the front and back doors of the house. Now you know all. There are, however, certain points in the affair that I, personally, have no connection with, but which my knowledge of the League and the habits of its members enables me to clear up for your benefit."

"For instance?" I hazarded.

"Well," Negrett answered slowly, "what puzzled me for some time was the question of the identity of the person to whom Tregaskis was speaking through the medium of the telephone when you overheard certain remarks that led you to commence investigating this remarkable case. It could not be the man 'S.' for he, as you know, was referred to in the conversation, and, besides, was at the time a captive in Cavendish Venwall's house at Ealing. Similarly it could not be Cavendish himself. Moreover, Rodney is out of the question, since he himself that same night took steps to communicate, by the means of the *Journal's* 'agony' column, with the remaining members of his society.

Who, then, was it but the fifth man, whose name, if I recollect rightly (though I cannot be sure), is Young. As to the present whereabouts of this man Young, I know absolutely nothing. I believe, though, that he has cautiously steered clear of any of the members of the League since he discovered, as I did, that its decrees were carried out in so deadly a fashion as they were in the case of the unfortunate young man whose marriage resulted also in his death in mid-ocean at the hands of Samuell.

"Another question that has puzzled me is how the man Rodney came to be in a position to warn his fellow-members against you, for I fully understand the veiled illusions to you in the 'agony' notice signed by 'R.' (Rodney), that appeared simultaneously with the request of your companion to Ealing for the cabman who drove you there to come forward. I argue in this manner. The man who gave this warning is named Rodney. He appears to be well acquainted with your movements. Your own partner — about whom, to my mind, you have been remarkably reticent—is named Rodney. What is the inference, allowing for all the vagaries of the demon, Coincidence? Out with it, Merton—am I not right in presuming that your partner and 'R.' are identical."

"Negrett, you are a wizard," I replied, in tones of genuine admiration of my companion's deductive skill. "If you had not behaved so shamefully, so disgracefully, so criminally in the forgeries case, a great career might have been your destiny. As it is—"

"As it is," interposed the man from Scotland Yard. "I am ruined, eh? Well, we shall see."

"What do you mean?" I asked, annoyed at the cool manner in which he treated the matter. I had seen a sudden change come across his pale, juvenile countenance as I spoke, and wondering as to what could have caused it I requested an explanation of his attitude.

He was almost quivering with momentary excitement.

"Fool, fool that I have been not to see it all before! Blind fool! Oh, my goodness, Merton, what asses we are! Detectives! nay, blundering ignoramuses. Why, it's as plain as plain can be. The man who accompanied you to Ealing and was present when you made the strange discovery in the empty house, was—who, you lubber?"

"Who?" I repeated, astounded at this exhibition, "How should I know? Who?"

"*Why, Barnard Venwall, of course, who has escaped from gaol!*"

CHAPTER XL

FACE TO FACE WITH THE STRANGER

THIS startling announcement held me spellbound, but Negrett continued without a pause.

"Don't you see my argument? Rodney, your partner, as a member of the League, knows Cavendish Venwall well by sight, though none too intimately. He is put upon his guard by the anonymous letter you say you received at the outset of this business. In fact, he recommends you to have nothing to do with it. Why? Because, probably, he suspects that it may have something to do with his secret—that he is a member of the A.M. League. Finding that you intend keeping the appointment anonymously arranged, he waits outside the office and sees a man enter and proceed upstairs to your apartments. It is late at night, and very dark, and he imagines that your visitor is none other than Cavendish Venwall, for the figure is his, and there are certain other similarities not hard to explain, since the cousins are not unlike in appearance. Much surprised and alarmed, he waits until you and your new client emerge from the building and depart together in a cab, of the destination of

which he is not aware. What then? He appears to have wasted a good deal of time before deciding to warn his fellow-members of 'danger ahead.' He does not know how to construe the visit of Cavendish to you, and naturally imagines that the erring member will reveal his actual identity for your benefit. The cause of this delay in furnishing the *Journal* with his advertisement of Cavendish's visit is not surprising. It was not until ten o'clock that he learned of it, and then he, no doubt, took some time deciding upon his course of action.

"But we knew perfectly well that it could not have been Cavendish Venwall that called upon you and took you to Ealing. Had it been he, what was his motive? He could have had none. Besides, until about this time, according to my reckoning, Cavendish was engaged at his house at Ealing.

"No, it was Barnard Venwall that employed you to accompany him to the house of his cousin. He said he had an appointment there, but that was not true in all probability. What he wanted, in what might be the few hours of liberty he was to enjoy before being tracked down and recaptured, was to obtain an interview with his cousin, tax him with being the real perpetrator of the crime, and wring from Cavendish a confession of the forgeries. That is why he wished you to accompany him. He needed a witness to the interview, lest afterwards Cavendish should retract and deny his confession."

"Negrett," I broke in at this juncture, "you are right, perfectly right, I am convinced. And you

are, as I have already said, a marvel, a wizard, a genius. Everything is clear now. My strange client's unshaven, dishevelled appearance, his slight injuries (no doubt incurred when escaping), his having no money—for I believe that he paid the cabman in something other than cash—in fact, everything. Everything, every incident in the affair goes to prove that your theory is correct. His agitation would be quite natural. His horror at discovering what he believed to be the corpse of Cavendish in the empty house was perfectly natural, since the death of his cousin destroyed all hope that the real criminal might be induced to confess to having forged his uncle's name. His tears when I left him alone with the reflection that his last hope had vanished are equally easily explained, his emotion being all the harder to conceal after his experiences in gaol, which had naturally unstrung his nerves. It is, perhaps, difficult at this stage to understand why he should have been so earnest in his endeavours to compel my silence, unless it was that the discovery of the body of Cavendish might lead to his own apprehension if he had left behind him in the lonely house any clue that might be of assistance to the police."

"No doubt. Rest assured we are drawing to an end of this matter. Exactly how it will all conclude is more than I can guess just now. The information I have given to Scotland Yard should lead to the early capture of Tregaski, Samuells, and your partner. I don't care a toss-up whether they catch the fourth man, nor, for that

matter, whether Tregaskis and Rodney manage to elude us. But I do long for the capture of that scoundrel 'S.' if only that I may give evidence on what I discovered about the death of Deacon, in revenge for the cowardly blow he struck me last night. And I pray that Cavendish Venwall may have escaped from the country, for if he has I have only you to deal with, and you, Merton, I know to be a gentleman.

"Now is there anything left to be done?"

For myself, there remained much to be accomplished before I could rest in happiness, but so far as Negrett was concerned there was little further to be done towards the final clearing-up of the mystery. Therefore I told my companion that until we should learn of the capture of Tregaskis and his fellows I intended returning to town and remaining there. At Negrett's earnest request, a promise was wrung from me that for three days I would take no steps towards revealing to the world the secret of the official detective's connection with the Farloe Forgery Case.

The latest newspaper contained no mention of the apprehension of Barnard Venwall, so presumably the innocent convict had made good his escape. Both Negrett and I could, however, recall the mention in the Press of the escape of a notable criminal, whose name the authorities had refused to divulge. This fact was additional proof—if any were required—of the extreme probability of Wallace Negrett's theory.

I parted from the Scotland Yard detective at

Baker Street an hour or two later, but not before I had been compelled to repeat my promise of temporal secrecy a dozen times. I could see that Negrett had some scheme in view, but what it was I could not guess. In fact, as I made my way towards Maida Vale, other and weightier thoughts occupied my mind.

I had not forgotten that we had traced my stranger client to Aubrey Square, whither he had repaired on leaving me after our visit to Ealing, and the wierd experience that made that visit so memorable. If Barnard Venwall had indeed taken refuge at the house of Mrs Spenser and my Carline, he must have some call upon them, and a sufficiently good one to compel them to hide the fugitive convict there. I was, therefore, hastening to Aubrey Square to ascertain exactly what were the relations of the unfortunate young man and the Spensers.

It was she, my Carline, that met me on the door-step, having caught sight of my approaching figure from a window. But it was a Carline that I had never known before—a merry, laughing, delighted Carline, on the very tenterhooks of acute excitement. And seeing her face, and knowing that such hearty joy—which I was not vain enough to imagine was solely the result of my arrival—could not be a cloak for any evil such as, in my blindness, my shameful inquisitiveness, I had feared she had been guilty of, all my dread, all my careful planning, was forgotten, and into my open arms I drew her until her rosy cheek met my lips in one long

embrace that fully rewarded me for any trouble I had expended while vainly trying to penetrate the dark secrets in which the case had been enveloped.

I had cast one glance around me before clasping my loved one to my heart, and I had believed that a grimy tabby cat was our only witness—with open eyes, expressive of mild surprise at this unparalleled episode in its prosaic career. But now, gazing up, I saw that a man's form filled the window, on the blind of which, standing out in strong relief, I had seen a mysterious male figure only a few nights before.

Perceiving the direction of my glance, Carline, still leaning upon me, with one arm encircling my neck, looked up too, then whispered gently in my ear as I recognised that the figure at the window was that of my stranger client, whom I now knew to be Barnard Venwall.

"Stanley," she said, "if you don't already know, I will tell you who he is. *He is my brother!*"

CHAPTER XLI

NO. 4 AUBREY SQUARE

LOOKING back into the past, and recalling my sensations consequent upon the unravelling of the various incidents that formed the mysterious case of the Venwalls, I recollect that this last discovery —perhaps the strangest, most unlooked-for of all—did not conduce to any great excitement on my part.

In that moment, when Carline revealed her deep secret to me in less than half-a-dozen words, my one impression was of profound admiration for my darling and a vain regret that she had not given me her entire confidence long before now.

I felt myself dragged rather than led into the house, whereupon the door was softly closed upon me. I saw Mrs Spenser approach me, and then, with a tenderness that I had not believed her capable of demonstrating, kiss me on the cheek, while her voice quivered as she playfully rallied me on having deserted Carline during the last day or two.

And then, slowly descending the narrow staircase, I saw him—my future brother-in-law, the

innocent convict, the deeply-wronged stranger who had accompanied me to Ealing—Barnard Venwall!

He held out his hand to me, and cordially grasped mine as he murmured a hearty expression of greeting. I noticed that he still limped as he walked, but that a suit of respectable garments had taken the place of the outfit he had worn when I had last seen him.

"Then, Mr Merton," he said, "you are safe."

"Certainly," I replied gaily, for Carline's happiness was infectious; "safe and sound. But you?"

"Ah!" broke in Mrs Spenser, "then you know all?"

"If not quite all, at any rate a good deal," I answered. "For instance, I am aware that your son has for some time been detained, though an innocent man, in one of Her Majesty's convict establishments."

"From which," added Carline, showing surprise at my knowledge, "he escaped a day or two ago, and has been hiding here ever since. It was he, Stanley dear, that you saw that night, and, oh, forgive me, love, it was for his sake that I deceived you about the tell-tale shadow on the blind. I ought to have trusted you, darling, but I knew that as you were a detective it would be your bounden duty to have him handed over to the police. But now, now it is all right. He is safe, Stanley, and can hold up his head with honest pride as an innocent man who has suffered for another's crime."

"I know well now," I said, "that he is innocent,

and that your cousin Cavendish is guilty. But what proof have we that it is so?"

"Only this," Carline cried joyfully, as she handed me a document similar to that in the possession of Wallace Negrett, which had been found in the pocket of the sham Cavendish, the corpse I discovered in the house on the hill-top.

One glance showed me that its nature was also similar. It was Cavendish Venwall's confession of crime, duly signed and attested by a witness whose name, when I saw it, caused me to start back in amazement. For it was that of Alfred Rodney, my erring partner!

"How did you obtain this?" I asked in excitement.

"It arrived by post yesterday," replied Barnard Venwall, "without any letter of explanation. But it is perfectly genuine. It is my bond of freedom!"

"I congratulate you, Venwall," I said earnestly, "and I admire your behaviour. Let us hope that this confession will indeed prove your salvation."

"There can be no doubt about that," said Mrs Venwall emphatically. I say "Mrs Venwall," for, as will be understood, the name of "Spenser" was one assumed by the lady, and consequently her daughter, when the unmerited disgrace had fallen upon them. They had changed their name because, owing to the uncommon nature of that which had been made so public in the great forgery case, they had been subjected to so much annoyance from busybodies, so much courtesy from even the tradesmen they engaged, so much suspicion from

their former "friends," that life had been made even harder for them than it actually was in consequence of the terrible blow the conviction of Barnard had dealt at them.

We had barely commenced the conversation, in which I hoped to be able to learn the explanation of many of the incidents in the strange affair that remained unsolved, when the jingle of bells disturbed the respectable silence of the Square, and a hansom turned the corner of the street, drawing up in front of the door of No. 4.

Two persons alighted and approached the house. Turning and peering through the lace curtains that framed the window of the room in which we were seated, I caught a glimpse of the new arrivals. Somehow I half expected to find that they were persons connected with the affair; but I was, to speak mildly, really astonished when I perceived that the visitors were the two veiled ladies—one young and pretty, the other elderly—of whom I had heard so much at the commencement of my investigation.

Hardly had the front door bell clanged, echoing throughout the house, when the jingle of harness bells was repeated, and a second cab drew up at the kerb opposite the Venwall residence.

In this case, too, it was two persons that stepped out and ascended the steps, after one of them had dismissed the driver by handing him his fare.

But this time they were men, and men as actively concerned in the case as the veiled ladies. For the first to emerge from the vehicle was Mr Wallace

Negrett of Scotland Yard, while his companion I instantly recognised as Cavendish Venwall, for he was the man who had spied upon us over the garden wall of the house on the Ealing hill-top !

CHAPTER XLII

STRANGE REVELATIONS

MY excitement was such that only by exercising as much self-control as I was capable of summoning to my aid could I contain myself and remain seated. I looked at my three companions. The same feelings, I doubt not, were agitating each of them. Barnard Venwall's face was strangely pale, yet how could I wonder at this when I knew he was to be confronted with his cousin, who had done him such grievous wrong? Mrs Venwall sat in her chair as though she expected, as I did, a scene as remarkable as any of the foregoing incidents in the case had been. As for my Carline, she drew the little three-legged stool on which she was sitting a little nearer to my own seat, and I felt her hand steal up to mine until she had caught it, holding it tightly, as though she needed my help in the coming interview. We heard the servant pass the door on her way to admit the visitors. The sounds of grating wheels, as one of the cabs moved away down the side of the square, accompanied the entrance of the two ladies.

Silently the veiled strangers walked past the

parlour-maid and entered the hall. They had caught sight of Mrs Venwall through the window, and not waiting to be ushered in, passed through the doorway of the little sitting-room and stood before us.

The veils of both were now raised, and an exclamation of surprise broke from my lips when in the person of the younger of the two I saw the very counterpart of my Carline.

My surprise was none the less when both Mrs Venwall and her daughter rose and greeted the newcomers with the utmost affection. Barnard likewise came forward to meet them, and then, as we heard the heavy footfalls of the men outside, Carline drew me towards the visitors.

"Auntie," she said quietly, "let me introduce you to my fiancé, Mr Merton. Stanley, this is my aunt, Mrs Andrew Venwall, and this my Cousin Lita."

"Mr Venwall and Mr Negrett," announced the servant before I had done anything further than bow to the two veiled ladies whose identity had been such a mystery to me.

With an air of jaunty indifference Cavendish Venwall strode into the room.

"What! you here, mother?" he exclaimed, in astonishment on catching sight of the lady I now knew to be Mrs Andrew Venwall. "You here? Then we're quite a family party. Well, aren't you pleased to welcome the return of the prodigal?"

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" cried his mother, breaking into tears as she stepped forward and threw her arms round the neck of Cavendish Venwall.

"Oh, why did you come back? I had hoped you had gone away for ever. And now?"

"What unmotherly sentiments," said the tenant of the house on the hill. "You wished I'd never come back? Well, you won't have me much longer. But congratulate me, mamma, and you too, Lita, for I'm going to be married to-morrow."

"Not if I have an opportunity of warning Miss Jessamine Siscombe," I muttered half aloud, my anger at the young man's behaviour getting the better of my good-breeding.

Cavendish heard me and turned suddenly.

"Ha! You're Mr Stanley Frank Merton, eh? Proud to meet the partner of my respected friend, Rodney."

The situation for every one was embarrassing in the extreme. Personally I felt myself to be somewhat an outsider, and did I not consider that I had as much right as any one to hear anything in the light of an explanation of unsolved points in the great mystery I should have suggested my departure to Carline.

As it was I decided to remain, and the advent of Wallace Negrett, who had certainly no connection with the family, made my own presence in the room less uncomfortable.

The Scotland Yard detective was not long in making himself known to the company, his companion being too occupied in conversation with his mother to make the necessary introduction.

When he had assured Mrs Spenser (I will give her her pseudonym to distinguish her from the

other Mrs Venwall) that, though a detective, he was present in an unofficial capacity, I noticed that the old lady seemed much relieved. Perhaps she was not yet quite sure of Barnard's safety, or possibly she dreaded that Cavendish, whom she knew to be guilty of the forgeries, might be arrested in her house for the crime for which her own son had been condemned.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Negrett suddenly, "my friend and I have but little time left before our train leaves for the seaside, whence we are going abroad. Consequently, it is advisable that any explanation required of us be demanded without delay. The little—er—statement made by my friend Cavendish Venwall recording his connection with the Farloe Forgeries will have revealed the true state of affairs, and at this point may I beg to congratulate Mr Barnard Venwall on his escape from prison and on being now able to clear himself in the eyes of the world of the misdemeanour he was erroneously believed to have been guilty of? Mr Merton will, at your convenience, explain how I come to be mixed up with the affair, but as even he (there was an ironical emphasis on the last word) does not know everything concerning the matter, perhaps my companion will explain the cause of his presence here and announce his intentions."

"Hear, hear!" cried Cavendish, with a laugh. I could hardly believe that before me stood the man who had not only committed the forgeries, but permitted his own first cousin to be convicted of

the crime. That this laughing remark came from the tenant of the lonely house, whose schemes and plots had formed one of the strangest of modern mysteries, seemed indeed incredible. Yet I had Negrett's word for it that Cavendish was the criminal, and Mrs Spenser held her nephew's own confession of the wicked plot to ruin his cousin.

Cavendish Venwall treated the whole matter as a joke. He was as hardened a criminal as any I have ever seen, and since I have now a partnership in the second largest inquiry agency in London, the remark is no idle one. Of course, I saw that he realised he was safe in the bosom of his family. The Spensers would not raise a finger against one of their own flesh and blood, even though they might be committing a felony in permitting the guilty man to escape.

Judging from his mother's greeting, Cavendish's departure to foreign climes was what Mrs Venwall most desired, since then she would be spared the terrible degradation that her sister-in-law, Carline's mother, had suffered as a consequence of Barnard's conviction. Moreover, Cavendish probably knew that, as for myself, I was engaged to Carline, and, therefore, would act as the latter and her mother did. From Negrett, who was equally guilty, he had no fear, since the detective intended flying to safety and some foreign country with Cavendish Venwall. I must confess that I was greatly surprised at this intelligence, for Negrett had persistently assured me that he hated his fellow-conspirator. I wondered whether the man from Scot-

land Yard was playing a game, or whether he had lied to me on this point. If the latter were the case, it occurred to me that all he had told me might be false, but I was soon to learn that he had indeed solved the problem—thanks largely to his own acquaintance with the guilty parties—that I, but for his aid, should have failed to unravel.

The story that Cavendish Venwall related to those present in the drawing-room at No. 4 Aubrey Square confirmed a great deal of the information that I had already obtained from Wallace Negrett, and I will merely mention here his explanation of facts upon which it had been beyond the detective's capabilities to throw much light.

His scheme for actually destroying his own identity was exactly as Negrett had imagined, and he had carried it out with the assistance of Rodney and the member of the League who had taken so small a part in the affair that I had not even discovered his name, which was "Yonge," and not "Young," as I had understood it to be.

The scheme had, in fact, been suggested by Rodney, who, when on a visit to Crowley Park, had witnessed the finding in the canal of the body of a man which at first sight appeared to be that of Cavendish but which proved to be the drowned corpse of a notorious young spendthrift named Timothy Boll, who had either fallen into the water when intoxicated or had committed suicide while under the influence of liquor.

To steal the body from the mortuary to which it was removed was an operation that required

little skill and only a dark night and a couple of strong arms. Packed in a common wooden box, it was then despatched on the day following its removal from the local mortuary to Venwall at Ealing, who was warned by message of its departure.

Subsequently Cavendish, who had the decency to withhold all details of his gruesome work, made the figure of the dead man unrecognisable by battering the features with the lid of the packing-case !

CHAPTER XLIII

ADIEU FOR EVER

IT appeared that the League, controlled nominally by Tregaskis but actually by Samuell, was in spite of its exclusiveness, divided against itself. Hence its fall.

While both "S." and the doctor were determined to carry out the original rules of the institution, both Rodney and Yonge, sympathising with Cavendish and horrified at the fate of Deacon on board ship, had determined to rid themselves of the encumbering chains that connected them with the League.

Venwall, being in greatest danger, was the first to be freed. Had his scheme for losing his identity succeeded, some similar step was to be taken by each of the others to throw off the bonds of the A.M. League.

In order to allay the possible suspicions of Tregaskis and the ever-watchful Samuell, it had been necessary for both Rodney and Yonge to play a double part. For instance, the former was compelled to assist in the treatment of Negrett and of

the village policemen while he had been planning with Cavendish against the League's only "faithful" members, Tregaskis and "S."

After escaping together with the two last-mentioned members from their headquarters at Crowley Park, Rodney had, on some sufficient excuse, left his companions to pursue their flight, himself hastening to Ealing, where he chanced upon Cavendish, who was remaining in the neighbourhood unable to account for the non-mention in the Press of the "confession" he had placed in the pocket of his fictitious dead self! They had discussed the matter together, and finally it was decided that, as escape was now the only course open to the real forger of the Farloe signature, it would be best for Cavendish to forward a confession of his own guilt to Mrs "Spenser," who could then take steps to clear her son of the crime of which he had been found guilty.

Rodney, after witnessing the signature of his companion, then left Ealing, determined on seeking safety abroad without delay. He begged Venwall to accompany him, but this the latter refused to do. He had already risked so much in order to win Miss Jessamine Siscombe that he naturally did not intend to lose a last chance of pressing his suit. Calling upon the young lady in London he had obtained her consent to an immediate marriage—if it could be managed—before a registrar. She was to meet Cavendish at a London terminus, whence they would travel (accompanied also by Negrett) to some seaside town, there to remain

until the marriage should be performed, after which the trio intended crossing to the Continent.

When the elder Venwall reached this point in his narrative I could not refrain from breaking in with an expression of my horror that a lady like Miss Siscombe should be united to such a scoundrel (I did not use so violent a word, though) without becoming first aware of his disgraceful past life.

"That is all right," replied Negrett, taking up the cudgels on behalf of his friend, who plainly was not, as he had tried to make me believe, his hated enemy. I saw it was a case of both being in the same boat. Both must float or sink together. Besides, Cavendish had not yet run through all the money that rightly belonged to his cousin, while Miss Siscombe was no pauper. And, therefore, Negrett was still in a position to levy blackmail upon his fellow-conspirator.

"That is right," the detective explained. "When I left Mr Merton to-day I hastened to the residence of Miss Siscombe, expecting to find our friend there, since I have had experience of the magnetism that usually draws a young man to the house of his fiancée. As I hoped, I found Mr Cavendish there, and interrupted him in the middle of an explanation of his position and a confession of his grave errors in the past. I can honestly inform the company present that Miss Siscombe not only was not deterred by her lover's narrative, but is fully bent upon continuing her engagement, which, as you know, will terminate so soon as the marriage ceremony can legally be performed."

"Oh, my boy," moaned Mrs Andrew Venwall, breaking in upon Negrett's narrative, "let this be a lesson to you. Maria (this to Mrs 'Spenser')—Carline—and, most important of all, Barnard, can you, oh, can you forgive him—just a little? Think of my shame and Lita's, the further degradation of our family name! Let all we have heard be a sealed book to the world. You know that my brother Everard has large estates in America. He is a rich man, but a lonely bachelor. He has asked us to go out and live near him. Houses and lands are cheap there. Why not leave England for ever, the England that has treated us all so cruelly? Why not try to forget the past in the happier and brighter prospects of the future? If my boy's confession is handed over to Scotland Yard, what will be the result? His safety will be ever in jeopardy. So, you will say, will Barnard's be, but I think not. Had the police any clue to his hiding-place they would have arrested him ere now. Oh, but what am I asking? Forgive me, Barnard. A mother's love demands too much for the object of that love. Why should you, an innocent man, even though you were free allow yourself to be deemed a criminal in the eyes of the world when you could at once show Cavendish up in his true light and clear yourself for ever?"

Barnard, who had been seated in a corner of the room, rose, and was about to speak, when Cavendish, hastening to reply, said:

"No, mother, this must not be." I saw that he had some difficulty in speaking. Whether real remorse was gnawing at his heart I do not know,

but there was a quiver in his voice as he went on :

" I'm a criminal, as you know, Mother, but I've not fallen so low as that. I have shown myself to be a coward and a scoundrel—so there's no need to mince matters. But I'm not going to have it on my conscience (where there's enough lying already to make life a burden) that I blasted a man's career. You may say that I have done so already. But no, Mr Merton will, after I have reached safety, hand this document to the police with some explanation of how he came by it that will not excite the public suspicion of his having in any way been party to my escape.

" Barnard will then be cleared, and it will be a matter to be decided among yourselves whether you remain in England or not. From this day forth I pass out of your lives. Let us hope that a good wife—for Jessie is as good a girl as ever breathed—will help me to mend my ways. Negrett and I are going to turn over a new leaf. Rather, we are going to try to accomplish this feat. And Jessie will help us. I want Negrett, because you must not forget that for years my danger of apprehension will be very great. Negrett, as a detective, retired though he may be, will help me to avoid danger, if only because he has himself revealed his connection with the forgeries to Mr Merton, and will himself run a fair amount of risk of arrest.

" And now, Barnard, I offer you my hand. I cannot expect you to take it. I dare not offer any apology. Mere words are useless on such occasions

as this. But, Barnard, I AM sorry! I came into this house with no real feelings of regret for my treatment of you. The sight of my mother has altered me! Barnard, Barnard, can you forgive me even if, as Mother says, it is only a little?"

His face was very pale. He was, as he said, a different man from the Cavendish that had entered the room half-an-hour before.

I am proud to recall Barnard's reply.

"Cavendish," he said, "in prison I loathed you and the very thought of your name. I vowed I would be revenged upon you, for I knew you must have arranged the plot against me. But now—now it is different. I never expected you would express sorrow for your treatment of me, because I know you are a proud man—pride and ambition, in fact, led you on to commit the forgeries. This is the hour of my vengeance, and my revenge is—to be able to extend my hand and forgive you from the bottom of my heart."

And so saying he seized the outstretched hand of his cousin and wrung it heartily. I saw a sudden twitching of his eyes as Cavendish turned his head, unable to look Barnard straight in the face.

The adieus were intentionally hurried, and consequently less painful than they otherwise might have been, and then, in a whirl of haste, Cavendish Venwall and Wallace Negrett passed together out of the house, and, so it seemed, out of our life for ever.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN

IN the subsequent conversation—which was naturally desultory and inclined to flag—the few remaining points in the affair that I had failed to make clear to my satisfaction were explained.

Concerning the “veiled ladies” that I had at one time associated so closely with the actual perpetration of what I had believed to be the murder at the lonely house on the hill, there were several facts that now became evident to me.

The mysterious couple—Cavendish Venwall’s unhappy mother and sister—had long been endeavouring to learn the whereabouts of the real author of the forgeries. There seems little doubt but that in some way they had learned of Cavendish’s guilt, and not only wished to induce him to confess his crime, but, even if they were unable to do this, to rescue him from the bad companions with which they had heard he associated.

At last, a few days before my first mysterious visit to Ealing, they had caught sight of him in

Paddington Station, and, desirous of finding out his home, had traced him to the hill-top house, which they had visited several times, in vain endeavouring to gain admission.

Then they decided to engage a detective to watch over his movements. They knew of none whom they could trust, but had learned that Carline was engaged to myself, and also that I was an amateur investigator in a small way of business.

Fearful of revealing their identity before seeing me, they had between them concocted the anonymous letter that had first drawn my attention to the case.

As I have explained, they arrived at my office at the hour named in the letter, only to find to their annoyance that I had gone.

For, as will be recalled, Barnard Venwall had visited me by chance at a little before the hour of the appointment, and, presuming it was he who had arranged that appointment, I had accompanied him to Ealing.

He had escaped only the previous day, reaching London in some clothes he had found in an unoccupied furnished house.

Before even calling upon his mother and sister he had come to me on the chance of finding me at my office. He had learned from the occasional letters he was allowed to receive from home of my connection with the family and occupation, and took me to Ealing, where he had learned, also from his mother's letters, that his cousin was living.

As I had come to presume, he required my

presence to witness the interview in which he hoped to wring from Cavendish a confession of the latter's guilt.

When he saw what he believed to be his cousin's corpse in the empty first-floor room he realised that he was too late, and, fearing that if he stayed he might, with the strong motive he possessed, be suspected of having himself murdered Cavendish, he had hurried me away, forgetting that I could have easily proved in what manner he had actually discovered the body. This same dread of being suspected, coupled with a knowledge he possessed of secret societies (with one of which he had learned that his cousin was mixed up), had led him to endeavour to compel my silence on the strange episode.

On leaving me in London he had "doubled" and repaired to the house in Aubrey Square, at which his mother and sister lived. There he paid the cabman in coin obtained from Mrs "Spenser," having previously given the driver a watch he had found in one of the pockets of his ill-fitting garments, since he had already spent the little money he had been able to save (as convicts can) when in prison.

Not until after the cabby had gone did Barnard realise how easy it would be for me to track him to his hiding-place unless he could make sure of the silence of the cabman as regards his journey to Ealing.

Despite the late hour, he dispatched a second cab to the office of the *Journal*, who handed in the

“copy” of the advertisement, in which the first jarvey was requested to come forward.

In the excitement of the moment he forgot to ensure the silence of the second cabman, as Negrett had managed to discover.

Curiously, the first cabman neither came forward to hear the “something to his advantage” which awaited him, neither did the police ever discover him in order to give evidence with regard to the journey to Ealing.

In the advertisement, Barnard had instructed the driver to proceed to the solicitor who had acted for him on his arrest for the forgeries, and Carline had hastened down to the City on the following day to explain matters to the family lawyer.

To return to those whom I shall ever remember as the “veiled ladies,” Mrs Andrew Venwall and her daughter, on finding my office deserted, had proceeded to that of Mr Coxstein, whom they knew to be the confidential friend and adviser of their relatives at Aubrey Square. They intended to place the matter in his hands, but failed to do so, being informed of the legal gentleman’s absence.

When the news of the strange discovery in the house at which Cavendish had been living reached them, at first they believed the prodigal was himself dead. But when they read in the newspapers that, instead of being the victim, Cavendish, known only as the tenant of the house, was suspected of having perpetrated the crime, in the abandon of grief they did nothing. Not until calling upon the

Venwalls of Aubrey Square on the eve of the interview there already recorded, did they learn the true facts of the case.

A single incident remains to be explained.

Later in the day, when Mrs "Spenser" (as I shall call her for the last time), her disposition softened and sweetened in a moment by her son's triumph, had withdrawn with Barnard, leaving me alone with my loved one, I asked Carline why she had visited Ealing on the day following my first visit there, and had called upon Mr Nicholas Yemen.

"I did it for *his* sake," she explained. "Barnard wished me to find out whether the death of the man he believed to be Cavendish had been discovered by the police. When I learned that it had, what with the horror of the idea that my cousin, wicked though he was, had been found murdered, and the fear that Barnard might have left some trace behind him that might prove a clue to lead to his capture, do you wonder that I nearly fainted?"

More than satisfied with this explanation of an incident that in my blindness I had construed as a proof of my darling's complicity in the case, I answered her in the phraseology most approved of by the true subjects of H.R.H. Cupid.

CHAPTER XLV

IN FRONT OF THE CURTAIN

MY story has been a long one, and that, perhaps, is the reason why I delay writing the word "Finis," although there is very little to be added.

Only this morning my wife managed to read aloud to me at the breakfast table, despite the shrill protests of the real master of my house, whose tender age prevents him from appreciating news that recall long-past incidents, a letter she had received from her frequent correspondent (one, moreover, that she has never seen), Mrs Cavendish Venwall. The latter informs us that her husband is one of the most respected citizens in some American town, of which he fully expects to be elected a sheriff at an early date. A man who has quickly made his "pile," he is relieved of a good deal of his work by his very competent secretary, Mr "Wallace," who has recently achieved distinction by unravelling a local mystery that baffled the entire police force of the neighbourhood.

It appears that two men, evidently travellers, for no apparent reason whatever, one night attacked Mr Cavendish Venwall (by the way, he would not

be recognised in his new surroundings by any such name as this!) in the grounds of the latter's palatial residence.

But for the timely arrival of the ubiquitous secretary the gentleman might have been severely treated. As it was, Mr "Wallace" managed to track down the assailants of his employer, though several days were occupied in the task, and the ruffians have been summarily dealt with.

What has been a "nine days'" topic of interest to folks in the locality, is that *the single letter "S."* inscribed in singularly ruddy ink, should have been found tattooed on the arm of the more ferocious assailant, while in the possession of the other man was a handkerchief marked "*Tregaskis.*" No further clue to the personality of these scoundrels or their motive in attacking so generally popular a philanthropist has been discovered—by the worthy American police, it should be added. For myself, well, the reader will understand the view I take of the incident.

Barnard Venwall, whose production of the confession of his fugitive cousin made him the most talked of man of the day, is in business in Ireland, where he shares the remainder of the Farloe fortune (returned to him by his cousin) with his charming wife, who was a Miss Lita Venwall and his first cousin.

Of Rodney, nobody knows anything. Whether he ever fell a victim to the vengeance of the two remaining members of the A.M. League (who were never apprehended) I cannot say. But a case,

chronicled in a French newspaper, concerning the mysterious death of a young Englishman on the day following his marriage to a beautiful French girl, recalled to my mind very vividly, when I read of it, the decrees of the strange league that was primarily responsible for the mystery surrounding the silent house on the hill-top.

THE END

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